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THE LEGENDS
OF ISRAEL

THE LEGENDS OF ISRAEL

ESSAYS IN INTERPRETATION OF SOME
FAMOUS STORIES FROM THE
OLD TESTAMENT

BY

LEWIS JOHNSON

McCORMICK
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PREFATORY NOTE

THE word "legend" in this book is used loosely to cover various kinds of narrative. Some of the stories under consideration here are primitive myths; others are folk-tales of early heroes; others are fragments of history more or less richly embroidered with fancy; others, again, are deliberate works of artistic fiction. But all have the common character of popular tales told down the ages, and always to be told, because of certain fundamental truths embedded in them. Attempt has been made here to emphasize and illustrate these underlying truths, and so a certain homiletic quality is given to the following chapters.

These are not, however, simply printed sermons, though the bulk of the material in them has been preached from the pulpit. They aim at emphasizing literary interests as much as moral interests. Indeed, the book is written in the conviction that all moral use of the Old Testament is vitiated without the aid of literary and imaginative insight, and that literary criticism is inseparable from a true didacticism. There is little or nothing new in the interpretations given; they are along the lines of criticism accepted by all modern scholarship. But such interpretations have not, I think, previously been gathered together in a single volume of popular essays. They are thus gathered here in the hope that they may contribute to a more realistic grasp of a very noble literature, grown unreal to many because the living work of human imagination in it has become petrified into an idol of supernatural prodigy. And

they are selected and presented so as to illustrate, as far as their material allows, many of the cardinal truths of our faith.

Readers who desire to explore further for themselves the grounds on which various critical treatments of these stories are based may consult with advantage the small popular volumes of the *Century Bible* commentary, especially Dr. Bennett's volumes on Genesis and Exodus, and Dr. Charles's on Daniel. Articles in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* and in the *Encyclopædia Biblica* will also frequently be found useful. For the geographical background so indispensable for the comprehension of many details in these stories, Sir G. A. Smith's *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* is of supreme value ; and Dean Stanley's *Sinai and Palestine* is also abundantly helpful. For a popular outline of the histories of the old empires the reader should consult the volumes on Chaldea, Assyria and Egypt in the *Story of the Nations* series. An admirable survey of the reaction of these empires upon Israel may be found, too, in Mr. Basil Matthews' little book *The Riddle of Nearer Asia*. Parallels from classical history and myth have been drawn from Grote's *History of Greece*. Several other authorities, such as Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites*, Frazer's *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*, etc., will be found referred to in the text.

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I

THE LOST EDEN

And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil . . . so he drove out the man ; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

GENESIS iii. 22-24.

I

THE LOST EDEN

IT is delightful now and then to get back into the child-like atmosphere of these old stories about the genesis of mankind. They are bathed in the freshness of the early world ; and the morning dew has never been blown away from them. They are grave as with the wonder of childhood, and content, as childhood is content, with very broad and simple moral conclusions. But it is with the big primary questions that they are concerned ; and their straight and simple thrusts toward elementary explanations remain provocative to us still—as a child's ingenuous surmise may sometimes flash light on a vexed question where the adult mind, with its confused half-knowledge, gropes hesitatingly for an answer.

How did the world begin to be ? Why is man subject to toil and sorrow ? Why does he die ? Why are there so many different kinds of men with different languages ? What keeps the sea in its place : why does it not spread all over the earth ? Such are the problems. They have engaged men's curiosity from the beginning. And the answers that the early world gave to them are full of interest.

Israel borrowed its answers to these questions from the literature of its older and more civilized neighbour, Babylon. Chaldean poetry had its myths which attempted, in lieu of science, to offer imaginative explanations of these problems. Nothing better was forthcoming ; and so Israel accepted these poetic myths, worked them over in the light of her higher religious conceptions, and embodied

them in her scriptures, where they still stand for our amusement and instruction.

In regard to the poem of Creation, the story of the Flood, and others, the parallel Babylonian accounts have been discovered, and we can make our detailed comparisons between them and the Bible versions. In regard to the story of the Garden of Eden this is not so. Yet the original of this story is almost certainly Babylonian. There is a famous cylinder of ancient Chaldean workmanship, now in the British Museum, which portrays a man and a woman sitting on either side of a tree, towards which they stretch out their hands for the fruit, while a serpent stands erect on its tail behind the woman, as if whispering into her ear. This is generally supposed to illustrate some such story as that of the Temptation. But more than this : it has been pointed out that the most ancient name for the coastward plain of Babylonia was Edin, with a chief city and port called Eridu, the site of which is now many leagues inland, owing to the sea being silted up by the great rivers ; and in Chaldean mythology there existed in the neighbourhood of Eridu a holy garden where grew the sacred palm-tree—the tree of life—with roots of precious stones reaching down into the abyss, while its trunk marked the very centre of the earth. The quaint geographical note inserted in the Genesis story at chapter ii. 10–14, probably by some later commentator, has even been ingeniously explained as adding evidence to the case for identifying this locality with Eden. For it is said that two other rivers, as well as Tigris and Euphrates, flowed separately into the Persian Gulf in those far-away times, and the Gulf, then reaching much farther northward than now, was itself thought of, and spoken of, as a river. Now, since its tides carried the sea-water far up-stream twice a day, the four inflowing rivers might have been ignorantly spoken of as outflowing from the Gulf : hence the one river which “ was parted and became into four heads.” Whether such surmise

be justifiable or not, there can be little doubt that our Eden story takes its ultimate origin from the sacred garden of Eridu in Edin, and that in its main features it follows an earlier Babylonian tale.

It is in any case obvious that our Bible narrative is a derivative one. There are features in it, lingering from some earlier source, which are not made an integral part of the story as related here. There is, in particular, the puzzle of the two trees—the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life was not forbidden to Adam and Eve, and plays no part in the story of temptation; yet at the close God is represented as turning the culprits out of Eden, lest, having eaten of the forbidden tree of knowledge, they should go on to eat of the tree of life, which the story up till then had expressly allowed them to do. And it is to guard this tree of life that the flaming sword is set upon Eden's gate. Evidently the Hebrew author is either trying to combine two distinct narratives, or else he is trying, somewhat clumsily, to re-shape the original narrative and give a fresh turn to it; and in so doing has left certain features of it indicated which have no real place in the story as he meant to tell it. They are not properly worked into his allegory, but stick out in it like eruptive boulders of ancient rock protruding into more recent strata. Sir James Frazer has argued, in his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, from parallels in other myths in various parts of the world, that the original story probably spoke of a tree of life and a tree of death, the former of which man was urged by God to eat, and the latter of which he was forbidden to eat; but the serpent—as elsewhere, in kindred myths, various other creatures—by its cunning induced man to disobey; man ate the deadly fruit and left the fruit of immortality to the snake, which, by casting and renewing its skin every year, was thought to survive indefinitely.

If this be so, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

belongs to a later variant of the story, which in the Hebrew version has ousted its predecessor—the story about the trees of life and death—yet not without leaving clear traces of the latter's influence. The original story would have set out to explain why man was not immortal. But we must trace another motive in the later version favoured by Genesis : the motive here is to account for the fact of human sorrow ; though the problem of death is still in the background of the writer's mind, and the suggestion that death is the penalty for man's misbehaviour is tacked on to the story.

The story of Eden in Genesis faces up to the problem : what is the curse that infects our world ? Why is man born to sorrow ? Why do labour and pain and death dog his footsteps ? Man is created with great potentiality for delight : yet his delight is so thwarted as rather to mock him than to satisfy him ; with great potentiality for beautiful achievement : yet his vision always outreaches his grasp, and he has the pain of an endless search without the glory of arrival. What means all this unsatisfied hunger, this weary battle ? “ As the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare, so are the sons of men snared in an evil time.”

All the ages have beaten their wings against this cage—this mystery of unescapable toil and grief into which we are all born. Each new generation may imagine, in its hot eager youth, that it will smash through the bars and win to liberty and paradise ; but after a while it, too, settles down under the iron discipline of earth. Eden is a lost treasure. We feel it as a *lost* treasure because of the ineradicable instinct in us that we ultimately belong to, and have rights in, a sphere of life different from, and better than, that which we now know. A Golden Age is our inheritance ; why, then, do we live through interminable Iron Ages ? Well ! the full answer to that query may be very long and complex—embracing, indeed, all philosophy. But this old

myth of Eden puts a finger on a salient point in it, and is content to say: "We toil and sweat in the wilderness because there is moral defect in us. We were intended for Eden, but we are unworthy of it." As it is disobedience that brings trouble to childhood, so the word "disobedience" is uttered by this old childlike literature as the indispensable key to unlock the great mystery of the troubled state of mankind.

Two fundamental intuitions surely lie at the root of the story of Eden and all other myths of the Golden Age—the intuition of a bliss potentially ours, and the intuition of a law we have transgressed. The impulses of desire and of conscience together have made men dream of Paradise as a thing humanity has lost. The placing of it in the far past behind us is but a token of our feeling that God's intention for us was altogether good and delightful. The blessed life is His original and abiding ideal. And it is our human defect of will which prevents its present realization. The more man comes to trust in God as love almighty—able to control and re-shape to His own splendid purpose the vagaries and rebellions of human self-will—the more clearly will Eden loom up ahead of us as a state still to be won. Yet it must always seem a thing regained when we arrive at it. We shall have got to the place we were born to belong to. And so the pursuit of blessedness has always struck men as if it were the retrieving of a lost good, the return home after exile; and the Eden we are bound for has been pictured on the far horizon behind us as the place we issued from. Just as a man driven to travel eastward sees the sun receding behind him as if it were to be irretrievably lost, only to find after journeying through the darkness that the sun is in front of him again, so humanity has travelled onward feeling that its Golden Age had sunk behind it, while in reality its every step was bringing it nearer to that age's dawn—rising in miraculous splendour upon undiscovered hills.

But there is another more particular reason for thus placing the Golden Age behind us. And we can, perhaps, best appreciate this if we recall the corresponding Greek myth of how Paradise was lost, which in its essential features is so similar to the story of Adam and Eve. The points in common between the two myths will give the clue to their underlying motive and significance.

In the beginning of things, said the Greeks, all was goodness and happiness. There was no need to toil for a living, and nobody was ever ill and nobody grew old. In these delightful circumstances there lived two brothers, Prometheus and Epimetheus. But the world was as yet without women. Prometheus, having occasion to go upon a long journey, warned his brother, whom he left behind, to beware of receiving any gift from the gods. But one day to Epimetheus in his solitude came Mercury, leading by the hand a beautiful girl named Pandora, whom he presented to Epimetheus, saying that the gods sent this gift so that he might not feel lonesome. Epimetheus promptly fell in love with her, and, forgetting his brother's warning, took her into his cottage. Some days later Mercury appeared again carrying a heavy corded box, and asked permission to leave it for awhile in the cottage—only on no account was it to be opened. Epimetheus consented, and faithfully put the box away in a corner. But while he was out hunting, Pandora in her idleness began to wonder about that box; and at last her curiosity became irrepressible. She thought there could be no harm in peeping; so she untied the knots and lifted the lid just a wee bit to glance inside. At once there flew out a swarm of winged insects which stung her distressingly, and stung Epimetheus too, who was at that moment entering the door. They hastily corded up the box again, but the damage was done: those insects flew all over the world, stinging every one. People began to quarrel; they began to have illnesses; they began to starve, for the fruits were spoilt. In fact, the Golden

Age was over, and human trouble had begun. The only compensation was that a little creature called Hope had been left in the box. For some time it knocked unavailingly to be let out. But at last Pandora summoned courage to raise the lid again. Out flew the little white moth-like creature Hope, and went all over the world to undo the mischiefs of the evil imps. But, with all her efforts, ill could not be wholly banished, nor the innocent peace of the Golden Age won back.

In this tale, as in that of the Garden of Eden, trouble comes upon mankind with the advent of woman, and through a woman's curiosity. And surely, in either case, what is really implicit in the story is the drama of puberty. It is the dawning of sex-consciousness which, with all its perturbations and introspective doubts and new explosive desires, puts an end to the innocent Eden of childhood and drives us out into the adult world of labour and anxiety, of pain and disillusionment. Childhood is cloistered, happily innocent, knowing nothing of good and evil, heedless of labour. Looking back to it from the perplexities and sorrows of maturity, it is as if we looked over into an old walled garden of fruits and flowers and smooth lawns where we lived at play long years since in what seemed eternal summers. "Heaven lies about us in our infancy"; but we have travelled far since then, and "we know, where'er we go, that there hath past away a glory from the earth."

Both these ancient tales are written with a masculine prejudice. But though they agree in laying blame upon the woman, this is but an accident due to the social bias of the ancient world; what they really emphasize is the disturbance and trouble which enter into human life with the consciousness of sex. The world of childhood is sexless; but with adolescence comes the recognized presence of woman by man, and of man by woman. There is the sense of a fascinating secret—a closed box, a forbidden fruit. And when that secret is disclosed there dawns the

knowledge of good and evil, and with it the protective sense of shame. This is not altogether true, but it is broadly true. Childhood no doubt has a rudimentary knowledge of good and evil, but this first becomes urgent—engrossingly and even oppressively urgent—in adolescence, when the awareness of sex and the power of sex begin to fill life with grave responsibility. It is then that the feeling of blunder, miscarriage and sin first begins to bring distressful self-reproach. Conscience awakes. We realize unexpected dangers in our very constitution. The body, with its new-found passions, is seen to be perilous. And even the purest flowering of love into happy marriage brings the need of labour and self-denial—the sweat of toil and the pain of travail—in such a way as to take us into a world far different from the cloistered garden of childhood. That lies closed behind us for ever, beyond our power to re-enter. We are now in the wilderness where we must create our own oasis by stern resolution, or else wander in misery. Every boy is Adam, and every girl is Eve, and the closed gates of Eden with their flaming sword are the symbol of unrecoverable childhood.

Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* is, in its dominant thought, a very close modern parallel to the old myth of Eden. The same theme was beautifully treated in the seventeenth century by Vaughan :

Happy those early days when I
Shined in my angel-infancy !
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy ought
But a white, celestial thought ;
When yet I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space
Could see a glimpse of His bright face ;
Before I taught my tongue to wound
My conscience with a sinful sound,
Or had the black art to dispense
A several sin to every sense,

But felt through all this fleshly dress
Bright shoots of everlastingness
O how I long to travel back
And tread again that ancient track !
But ah ! my soul with too much stay
Is drunk, and staggers in the way.

In one sense Eden is lost in the process of our inevitable growth toward maturity, but a more tragic meaning is intended in the allegory in Genesis. We are all bound to pass out of moral ignorance into the knowledge of good and evil. So far is this from being against God's will that it is evidently His deliberate design in the making of us. And the story of Eden has its moral effect a good deal blurred by the intrusion of the primitive fallacy about the jealousy of the gods at man's growth. We must put that idea out of mind. God intends us to arrive at moral knowledge ; and we cannot choose the good until we have perceived evil as evil. But is sin, then, necessary to our growth ? Not if by sin we mean wilful transgression of a recognized law. And the Genesis story bases itself upon the fact that such wilful sin exists. Adam and Eve have already won the consciousness of good and evil in their awareness of God's edict. But alas ! men will not really learn save by bitter experience. There must indeed be a process of trial and error which first reveals what is right ; that is the giving of the divine edict. But men have not been content to be so taught. They have guiltily persisted in recognized wrong, and drawn upon themselves bitter penalties. It is this fact that the story of the Fall emphasizes. The sorrow of our lot comes through transgression—not merely through blundering mismanagement of our experiments in life, but through wilful disobedience to laws already recognized and confessed. Error may be inevitable, as a child learns to walk by inevitable tumbles. But the Fall is not an error ; it is a crime. The story of Eden does not attempt to explain philosophically the origin of sin ; nor to fit the fact of sin into any theory of God's providence or man's

evolution ; nor to trace the passage of error into guilt. It does not explain where the tempting serpent comes from, and why. It is content to press home the fact that man as he emerges out of the moral ignorance of infancy, becomes aware of a moral law in the world which he nevertheless disobeys ; and it is this deliberate disobedience which turns him out of his garden of peace.

The great folk-tales of the world constantly press home the fact upon us that there are certain moral conditions laid down for our life on earth about which we have clear warning, and that all disaster comes from disregard of them. Cinderella must be strictly careful to return home before the clock strikes twelve ; little Snowdrop must on no account whatever open the door to strangers ; Eve must not eat one particular sort of apple ;—or else disastrous trouble will follow. There are things that may not be done with impunity in this world. We know this, yet we still do them. And it is this disobedience of ours that brings about such dismaying results. We lose Eden by a moral fall or fault, says Genesis. And that piece of sound ethic is echoed all through the folk-lore of the world. We do not only err ; we disobey, and are ashamed of ourselves. That is surely the manly confession to make as against all foggy and equivocating attempts to explain away guilt as inevitable, and therefore negligible, error. Much wrongdoing in this world is mere error. But man is not entirely this innocent and misguided fool. He can sin with open eyes. And he does so sin. The Fall of Man happens every day. And it is this open-eyed sin which Genesis seizes upon as the one outstanding cause of all our woe.

The story of Eden preaches no gospel ; it only symbolizes the facts which make a gospel necessary. Humpty-dumpty has had a great fall on this earth, and made a sorry mess of it ; everywhere we look we see the spattered tokens of his sprawling folly. And not all the king's horses and all the king's men can contrive to put him together again

There is a way out of the ruin, but only through the grace of God, not through mere human ingenuity. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," saith the Lord." It needs a new spirit infused into us by God to lift us from our falls. But that Spirit is available ; and because of it Hope is on the wing among us, healing and mending our sick and broken lives. "We fall to rise," says Browning. So, with God's grace, it may be. And hence Genesis points on to the Apocalypse, where the tree of life, guarded from us now by flaming cherubims, shall be discovered again at last in the midst of the City that descends from heaven—to whose citizenship we are all called ; whose gates shall not be shut at all by day, and there is no night there ; it stands wide open—the inheritance of all penitent and upward-striving souls.

If man falls, God stoops after him ; and the world that might have been is still the world that may be. That is our hope. It is no use slurring over our guilt. We have sinned by our own fault, our own most grievous fault. But God's grace is stronger than our wilfulness ; and the world, which our wanton folly has brought to such ruin, shall, by that grace of His, be restored.

Those who hold this New Testament faith must needs be bent upon confirming with it the young adolescent hearts that feel the first shocks of temptation and failure. These boys and girls in their early 'teens, thrust out of their untroubled Eden of childhood, need much wise strengthening, much reassurance that good is in store for them ; that with God's help they may win a path to that tree of life they seem to have lost ; guarded, indeed, now by sword of flame from all indolent and cowardly folk travelling the paths of vain regret or heedless frivolity, but not from those who prayerfully face toward that City of Open Gates where God abides. Some rite of confirmation should surely be practised as a means of grace to those who stand on the threshold of youth. All the great religions

have marked out that period of growth as a time for some special effort to establish young life in right courses. Adolescence cries out for help, and the wisdom, no less than the tenderness, of the adult world will strive to give that help, and bring a special grace of the Holy Spirit to guide the young as they cross the bar out of childhood's harbour into the open sea of the world's life with all its rough and tumble, its perilous currents and storms. No doubt our services of Confirmation may often enough be very lame and shallow ceremonies. But the sacrament, in its essential idea and purpose, is exceedingly precious, and we neglect or misuse it at great cost to the wholesomeness and safety of the growing generations. These young creatures passing out of Eden, conscious of coming toil and battle, with such a storage of fair dreams, and such a shrinking from ugly realities—it would be a cruel thing if the adult world did not stretch out a helping hand, if it had no encouraging and enlightening message to offer, if it had no power to convey some measure of God's grace to them.

But the Christian Church, in so far as it be Christian, has this power. It knows well the fact of *Paradise Lost*, but it preaches the promise of *Paradise Regained*. It knows the sternness of the closed gates, the human irretrievability of lost innocence, but it points to where a City of Life descends from heaven upon earth—a thing not built by man's merit but given by God's grace, into which men may enter ransomed from their falls.

And so it bids youth go forward, trusting not in its own strength but in the power of God's Spirit: "Defend, O Lord, this thy child with thy heavenly grace that he may continue thine for ever; and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit, more and more, until he come unto thy everlasting kingdom."

In such faith, and under such blessing, our youth may leave behind the garden of childhood without fear, and in the twin graces of penitence and hope be made strong to

take its share in preparing in the wilderness of this faulty world the foundations upon which shall descend the Holy City ; in the midst of the street of which, and on either side of the river, grows the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse.

II

THE MESSAGE OF
THE RAINBOW

I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud : and I will remember my covenant which is between me and you ; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.

GENESIS ix. 13-15.

Look upon the rainbow, and praise Him that made it ;
Very beautiful it is in the brightness thereof.
It compasseth the heaven about with a glorious circle,
And the hands of the most High have bended it.

ECCLESIASTICUS xliii. 11, 12.

II

THE MESSAGE OF THE RAINBOW

AMONG the mountains of western China there is to be seen a marvel which the Chinese call the Fo-Kuang or Glory of Buddha. A certain peak among these mountains is flanked by a precipitous cliff more than a mile in height. And as one looks over the edge of this appalling precipice, there is to be seen at times—according to the narrative of Englishmen who have witnessed it, as recorded in the transactions of the Royal Geographical Society—“a sunlike disc, enclosed in a ring of prismatic colours more closely blended than in the rainbow.” This brilliant apparition is only visible when the precipice is clothed in mist. The disc of light appears to lie on the surface of the mist, and is always in the direction of a line drawn from the sun through the heads of the observers. It is a curiously reflected image of the sun, and the enclosing prismatic ring is a species of rainbow. But devout Buddhists assert that it is all an emanation from the aureole of Buddha.

A rather similar phenomenon has often been observed by travellers among the Ghâts in southern India. There, too, is a spot overlooking a deep precipice; and, with a fog hanging in the valley up to the level of the observer, this is what may be seen, as it is recorded by one traveller: “I was placed at the edge of the precipice, just without the limits of the fog, and with a cloudless sun at my back at a very low elevation. Under such a combination of favourable circumstances the circular rainbow appeared quite perfect, of the most vivid colours—one half above the

level on which I stood, the other half below it. Shadows in distinct outline of myself, my horse, and people appeared in the centre of the circle, as a picture to which the bow formed a resplendent frame. My attendants were incredulous that the figures they saw under such extraordinary circumstances could be their own shadows, and they tossed their arms and legs about, and put their bodies into various positions, to be assured of the fact by the corresponding movements of the objects within the circle ; and it was some little time ere the superstitious feeling with which the spectacle was viewed wore off."

I dare say these stories could be multiplied if one sought for parallels in other parts of the world ; but they are enough to bring before one's imagination the marvels with which Nature provokes our curiosity and awe ; and to mark, too, the inevitable tendency of the human mind, untrained in scientific investigation, to jump to some fanciful explanation of such phenomena, and to hedge them about with superstitious reverence. When in touch with such stories one feels that one is close to the heart of the primitive folk who wove the myth of the Great Flood and the First Rainbow. What that very peculiar and dazzling spectacle called the Glory of Buddha is to a Buddhist Chinaman, so must every rainbow have been to the folk of the early world. It was sheer miracle, utterly beyond understanding or scientific surmise. All that a man could say was that it belonged to the gods. Some, e.g. the Chaldeans, declared that it must be the deity's necklace. Others, e.g. the Greeks, spoke of it as a bridge by which the gods travelled across the heavens. Others looked at the bows they used in fighting and hunting, and declared that the brilliant arch of light was, of course, the war-bow of a warrior god. This was the best they could do in the way of explanation. The apparition belonged to the inscrutable powers overhead. It was yet another sign of their awful marvellousness ; and all that man could do was to bow in the dust,

and hold up his pathetic little offerings so that the Shining Ones might be kind to him.

But a thought of mercy, an emotion of hope was induced—perhaps everywhere, and certainly among the old Israelites—by this beautiful apparition in the midst of storm. The contrast of its delicate brightness with the black fury of cloud behind it, and its opportune arrival just as the storm breaks up, seemed like a signal of hope and a promise of the merciful beneficence that dwelt in the heavens despite all tempest. That radiant arch filled men with delight and admiration even in the midst of all the discomfort and peril of savage weather. It restored their spirits, as daybreak does to a sleepless sufferer or to shipwrecked outcasts upon the sea. Anyone can be cheerful with the return of light ; but here was not light only, but colour most gorgeous and most tender, woven by super-human wizardry, and curved with exquisite grace and vast breadth of power from horizon to horizon. A world with so stupendously beautiful an object in it might surely be trusted—an object born out of the very bosom of the storm itself. What could it indicate, this triumph of magical light over grim darkness, save the merciful goodwill of the Eternal Power ? “When I bring a cloud over the earth, my bow shall be seen in the cloud ; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.” Thus it seemed to their hearts that God spake.

And even we sophisticated people of to-day must, I think, be similarly touched if we let our imaginations dwell for a little on this marvel of the rainbow. When science has done all it can to explain its origin, the thing still remains as surprising as any magic and lovelier than any deliberate art. It is next to impossible to look at its radiant grace and not incline to believe it the work of a Mind that is careful for beauty ; no wild and savage power bent upon destruction, but a calm and dexterous power bent upon construction, determined to draw forward and exalt our human spirits

by flashes of unearthly beauty. Keats, in his *Lamia*, complains that rationalistic philosophy dispels the sense of the supernatural :

There was an awful rainbow once in heaven ;
We know her woof, her texture ; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, the gnomed mine,
Unweave a rainbow.

But such is not the deepest philosophy. You may explain the whole process of the refraction of light, the prismatic action of the falling raindrops, and the geometrical laws that govern the shape of the bow ; but still the heart replies : “ from worlds not quickened by the sun a portion of the gift is won.” For this thing has communications to make with the emotions as well as with the analysing intellect. We are as sure that joy and confidence flow from it as that certain laws of physics govern its appearing. It reveals a world of spiritual values as certainly as the spectroscope discovers new substances or the telescope new stars. It is what it looks to be—a bridge between heaven and earth. And our hearts echo the truth expressed in the old Homeric hymn where it is Iris, the rainbow, who brings to Demeter, the earth-mother, the message of Zeus, assuring her of the good-will of the god of the stormy sky toward her, and so bridging over the gulf of estrangement between earth and heaven.

The story of the Great Deluge, with which the message of the rainbow is associated, has its parallels, as is well known, scattered over the greater part of the world—in Babylon and Greece, in India and Malay, in the Pacific Islands, and up and down the length and breadth of the American Continent. Whether due to legendary reminiscence of disastrous local floods, or to mythic fancy playing around the discovery of fossil shells among the inland mountains, or whether it be due merely to humanity's vast surprise at

the ocean, kept now within safe boundaries like a tamed beast in a kennel, but kept there man knows not how, save that it be by God's mercy ; whether due to any or all of these causes no one can accurately declare, but the Deluge Story is probably the most widespread myth on earth. It is a little surprising that no comparable myths have arisen about destruction by volcanic fire or by hurricane or pestilence. The destruction of Sodom, or the destruction of the host of Sennacherib, are Biblical examples, but they do not rise to the appalling proportions of the story of the Deluge. Flood is the catastrophe which has most indelibly impressed itself on the imagination of mankind. After all, any other catastrophe—even earthquake—does leave solid ground beneath our feet. But with the very earth submerged, the last hope of man disappears. So it was upon the catastrophe of deluge that human fear focused itself, as the one supremely dreadful catastrophe among all the various perils with which human life is threatened. One wonders whether the ancient traditions of deluge can have had some faint reminiscent connection with the enormous changes in the earth's surface—the changes from sea to dry land, and from dry land to sea—which are the axioms of modern geology, and over against which all minor accidents of the historic period appear negligible. It appears, to me at least, that no mere local floods are adequate to account for the flood myth. One seems to see in it rather the terror of ocean, and the very natural thought that we see in the ocean the dwindled remains of a once all-engulfing water. Otherwise, why should the sea exist at all ? The simplest explanation of it that occurred to primitive man was that God had once upon a time made up his mind to drown the world ; and the sea, kept in its place now by God's mercy, was the relic and everlasting reminder of that awful doom, while the rainbow was the divine pledge that henceforward the dry land should be kept safe.

This promise of the rainbow which is given as an appendix

to the flood myth is, perhaps, a later addition to the tale. But there are one or two hints in the old Babylonian literature which suggest an early connection of the rainbow myth with the flood myth, and so it is probable that our Hebrew writer was working upon ancient material in this appendix as in the main story itself. And he works upon it nobly. He, with his strong sense of a Providence in history, his conviction of a divine covenant with man, seizes upon the rainbow as the culminating fact in the whole tale of the Deluge. Whatever the horror of flood may signify, more significant still to him is the message of the bow—that there shall be an escape for humanity from divine dooms ; that God's design for man is merciful ; that the last word shall not be destruction, but survival and peace. "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."

We are set upon an earth capable of staggering frightfulness. Hurricane and earthquake, flood, famine, and pestilence make our life here a very precarious venture. And in our heavy troubles we are quick to upbraid the Creator of so dangerous and painful a planet. Well ! we cannot pretend to an adequate understanding of it all as yet ; but if we keep our courage and sanity we can see that this hard training-ground is educating man toward the mastery of nature, and developing his powers as no soft lotos-eating world could do. Man is not a doomed creature. Along with the peril there is a promise of escape. He sees not yet all things put under him ; but he is on the road to conquest. And his advance has come just through that necessity of struggle with grim natural forces which were inexplicably dreadful to him in the childhood of the race. Now he can afford to view them more serenely. He begins to see that the discipline of earth is not meaningless or wantonly cruel. It has served a purpose—a purpose which, when fulfilled, may completely justify the process. And to-day we can look back with a pleased surprise, as

we look upon courage in a child, to the brave hope of those early forefathers who, amid flood and tempest, saw in the rainbow a token of divine covenant that the purpose of the world was good.

Tyndall tells how once, on a foggy night in the Alps, he opened a door at the end of a passage in the house where he was staying and looked out into the gloom. Behind him there was hanging a small lamp by which the shadow of his body was cast upon the fog. And sweeping round the shadow was a pale white luminous circle. As he walked out into the fog this curious halo went in advance of him. In his playful way he comments, "Had not my demerits been so well known to me, I might have accepted the phenomenon as an evidence of canonization." Yes! for so the true saints of this world go forth through the darkness of its yet inexplicable sorrows and perils embraced in a divine light of faith and hope. God's halo surrounds the saint, not because he is the only man so encircled by the promises and providence of God, but because he is the only man who is fully aware of being so surrounded. He has the eye of faith to see what our purblind distrustfulness cannot see. And he therefore walks through the fog and tempest of our earthly experience illumined with hope, encircled by protecting rays that guide him through the gloom. And of such an one we say, as Rossetti said of his hero in *Hand and Soul*, "Seeing his face in front, there was a glory upon it, as upon the face of one who feels a light round his hair."

There come to all of us in this world hours of deep gloom when it is most difficult to be hopeful. It may be that some untoward circumstance brings economic disaster upon us unexpectedly, and the whole fruit of a life's labour seems perished. We have to begin at the beginning again, when our youthful zest and exuberance are gone, and we have no heart for the task. And the bleak comfortless prospect looks like a shoreless sea to a drowning man. It may be that we are concerned in some spiritual strife, battling

for some forlorn hope of reform or amelioration, and against us flows the heavy tide of popular custom and prejudice. How futile all the effort seems ! It is as if we tried to plough the ocean. The wide waste of human inertia spreads far around us, seemingly impenetrable ; the black clouds of intolerance and resentment gather overhead, and perhaps break at last in a fury of persecution. The heavens above us are lead, and the earth beneath us a stone, and it seems as if we should be crushed between them as prisoners are said to have been crushed to death in the old grim days by the slow sinking of their cell's roof. It may be that death has ravaged our household and torn away a life that seemed part and parcel of our own, till our whole being is left in shreds and tatters, and we are dazed and sick as if with the loss of our own blood. It may be that some awful public catastrophe, some abnormal explosion of social wickedness—as in the days of Nero, or the Paris guillotine, or the German war of yesterday—has knocked all our plans and hopes to pieces like a child's brick palace, until we seem to be left alive merely upon a dust-heap of ruined ideals. Or it may be that even in calm weather, with a fair and prosperous world about us, we are inwardly seized, we know not how or why, by unaccountable humours of dreadful apprehension that fasten upon us like a disease and blacken our universe from pole to pole. In such hours, when the little ark of our hopes is drifting across the bewildering waters of a sunk or drowning world, faith alone can light up the prospect and

Trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.

To the faithful even then the light shines about their heads ; the inky blackness is transfigured by the miraculous seven-fold arc of colour ; and they discover in the midst of their suffering an incredible boon of beauty and of peace—a

revelation of God's everlasting mercy. They are enabled to see that the flood is not a final disaster to destroy all flesh ; it is but a baptism and purgation of the earth whence life shall rise again young and new.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform :
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take ;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Wonderful is the power of faith to transmute grief into glory, darkness into light ! The Happy Warrior, when doomed to go in company with pain and fear and bloodshed, turns his necessity to glorious gain :

Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
Of their bad influence and their good receives. . . .
And he, if he be called upon to face
Some awful moment to which Heaven has joined
Great issues, good or bad, for human kind,
Is happy as a lover ; and attired
With sudden brightness,

—with the aureole of faith.

Faith is a determination to estimate life valiantly and hopefully—to cling on to the tokens of good-will therein until what is dark to us becomes luminous and we know as we are known. The more persistent our faith, the more grounds we find for faith to rest upon.

But every man must make his first act of faith as if he were stepping to a great adventure. There is enough hope of reward to draw him onward, but only by experience can he discover the greatness of the wealth to be won.

But faith for ever justifies itself. To the brave and loyal the storm always does end in a glory of magical light. After crucifixion, resurrection. It is precisely through these deep glooms and perils that our spirits win their finest

insight. By these things we come to see the hidden marvels of spiritual fortitude and power, the invincibility of the soul. "In the fell clutch of circumstance my head is bloody but unbowed." Such a cry represents the first-fruits of victory—a defiant trust in one's own spirit. But therein is planted the root of a gospel of reconciliation by which we come to estimate the purpose of the world in the light of these spiritual results, and to understand that what seemed to be the assault of an implacable enemy was after all nothing but the discipline of a love which knows us better than we know ourselves. Without rain and mist you can have no "Bridge of the Gods," no "Glory of Buddha." And without the floods and waterspouts of trial and suffering you can have no reconciling spiritual illumination, no aureole of victorious sanctity. It is true enough that some men may be worsened by hardship ; but men of faithful courage are not worsened by it. They are cradled into holiness by it, as Shelley said others were "cradled into poetry by wrong, and learnt in suffering what they taught in song."

Let us have courage to trust this world then—a world flashing with rainbows amidst its clouds and glooms, physical and spiritual wonders standing out of the most black and bitter circumstances to dazzle us with revelation of the grace enshrined at the heart of things. Let the magic rainbow be to us, as to old Israel, a symbol of God's covenant with humanity. This brilliant ethereal creature born of the marriage of light and water ; this fairy tapestry hung in heaven ; this sudden elusive apparition which our hearts leap to behold, is a sign from the Almighty, a promise of the ultimate beatitude of life.

Life on this planet, as Shakespeare visioned it in his mature reflection, is like the experience of mariners tossed up by tempest on an unknown isle—flung in disorderly rout upon it, and left to devise what schemes they can for comfort. But there is a hidden enchantment that guides them through

many bewildering mazes—startling them at whiles by evanescent flashes of unearthly light and uncapturable strains of heavenly music, but leading them at length to safety and reconciliation and love and home. Some of them play the coward and fool besottedly, and so get themselves into endless avoidable difficulties. But Prospero, the lord of the isle, has his way with them, and his purposes prevail. And so after Tempest there comes Peace. That is Shakespeare's last reading of earth. And we will believe with him that our tempest-smitten world is but the vestibule to a place of enchanted peace, from which even now light and music stream down upon us at odd moments, and in which, at length, all mysteries shall be cleared away and the radiant light of God encircle us for ever.

III

BABEL AND PENTECOST

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven ; and let us make us a monument, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language ; and this they begin to do : and now nothing will be restrained from them which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth : and they left off to build the city.

GENESIS xi. 4-8.

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

ACTS ii. 1-4.

III

BABEL AND PENTECOST

THE Chaldeans used to build their temples in the form of pyramids which drew their eyes skyward as do the steeples of our Christian churches. These pyramids, or ziggurats as they were called, were not built in the same way as the pyramids of Egypt. They were built up by a dwindling series of square-walled platforms, each one standing in the midst of a larger one beneath it—exactly like those nests of wicker boxes that fit one within the other, if these are separated out and piled up in series with the littlest at the top. Each stage—of which there were probably seven as a rule—was painted a different colour, black for the bottom one, then orange, crimson, gold, azure, and so on to the summit. On the top platform stood the shrine, with its statue of the god; while a great retinue of priests lived in various chambers in the lower stories. These temple-pyramids were used, too, as observatories, for the Chaldean religion made astrology its handmaid; and this was a particular reason for elevating the temples far into the clearness of the sky.

In those low-lying marshy plains of Babylonia it was the custom to raise huge mounds, forty or fifty feet high, as foundations on which to build the palaces and temples. There are no natural elevations, and yet for the sake of health and safety it was necessary to raise one's buildings above the level of floods and fevers. Hence these enormous mounds—the ruins of which are still to be seen—were

piled up. They must have required the labour of many thousands of slaves working for many years. It is a labour prodigious to contemplate and wellnigh incredible. Yet these enormous hand-made hills seem to have been erected in profusion. Almost every sovereign made it a point of honour to build himself a new palace, and this would frequently entail a new hill-foundation. But there may have been sufficient material cause for this multiplication of new palaces ; for these hills, though walled on the outside by excellent baked brick cemented with bitumen, were internally mere rubbish-heaps of crude brick and earth, which soon cracked and sank under the influence of the weather, so that the buildings erected upon them cannot have had a very prolonged life. Old Chaldea must have been full of these fallen and derelict buildings, standing forlornly on their disintegrating mounds. The ruins of one great pyramid-temple may still be seen at the famous mound of Birs-Nimrud at Borsip, close to Babylon. It has for long centuries been identified with the Tower of Babel, though there are other claimants to that title which are preferred by some modern researchers. The tower at Borsip was a ruin in Nebuchadnezzar's day, and he claims to have restored it, mentioning that its original design had never until then been completed. It was very large, and reached a height of rather more than a hundred and fifty feet. Whether or no this is the actual building whose unfinished and ruinous condition gave rise to the story of the Tower of Babel is problematical and not very important. But it was obviously the sight of some such huge building, incomplete and deserted, which gave point to the tale.

Whether the story in Genesis has an earlier parallel in Babylonian literature seems a little uncertain. George Smith, who first recovered the Chaldean version of the flood story and made so many other notable finds among the British Museum tablets, got hold of what seemed likely

to be a version of this story ; but it was too fragmentary to decipher with any certainty. Such a version, however, is given, it is said, among the surviving fragments of a history of Babylonia written by an ancient Greek scholar, Berossus, for the benefit of his master Alexander the Great ; and Berossus's story may very likely have come from some old Chaldean writing now lost. But the Genesis story reflects the mental outlook of nomad tribes, not city dwellers like the Chaldeans, who are not likely to have seen anything morally culpable in the building of sky-scrapers such as stood around them every day. The legend of the fall of Babel must, it would seem, have originated among the wandering tent-dwellers to whom such great buildings looked like embodiments of intolerable human pride, which God must needs punish.

And we can properly appreciate the moral emphasis of the story only when we feel our way backward into the point of view of the ancient nomad. Constantly face to face as he was with the ungovernable forces of nature, feeling his utter dependence on the Lord of nature for his mere day-to-day existence, the nomad was shocked at the presumption which could dream of a permanent and secure dominion over nature, such as was symbolized in these would-be everlasting structures of the city folk. And if he saw some such gigantic work crumbled and fallen, the moral to him would be clear : man had dared too much, and the divine wrath had punished his presumption. To the nomad there was a sort of insolence or flippancy in all civilized life—as of people who will settle down in homes on the slopes of a volcano : it cannot be done with impunity. These city-dwellers did not seem to him to realize the precariousness of their position in this world. And when it came to raising towers whose tops should reach the very dwelling-places of the gods—why, to these simple-minded folk it was sheer madness of wicked pride to dream of such a thing ! Of course, God would never

tolerate such presumption. We men are on the earth by sufference, and we must not take liberties with our position, or forget how perilous and transient it is.

The world has passed away from this standpoint altogether. We no longer look upon civilization, with its efforts after secure and permanent comfort, as an evidence of man's overweening pride, an insulting challenge to the Lord of nature who wields thunderbolts and hurricanes. We believe it is God's purpose for us to conquer nature, and make the earth secure for human life. God is with us, not against us, in that task. The establishment of civilization is not in itself an encroachment on the divine power, nor an example of wicked arrogance. But though, to our minds, the old nomads were wrong in their illustration, they were right in their principle that insolent pride is the arch-opponent of God and the root-cause of the disruption of society. It is the Satan whom God must for ever hurl down from heaven. And in its disconcerted wake come civil strife, "red ruin and the breaking up of laws." The spirit which renounces humility and forgets the fear of God is the spirit which dissolves society into warring elements, and breaks the one body limb from limb.

Centuries later the great prophet Isaiah also saw in Babylon a supreme type of human arrogance, and predicted its humiliating overthrow at the hands of God: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. The Lord of Hosts shall make Babylon a possession for the bittern, and pools of water: and shall sweep it with the besom of destruction." In that passage we have clearly stated the real lesson of the legend of Babel: it preaches the doom of pride.

The ancient writers seized upon the fact of diversity of language as evidence of this curse of God upon pride, because such diversity was a natural symbol of social disruption. It has puzzled primitive mankind everywhere, and there have been attempts in many quarters to account for it by myths more or less analogous to the story of Babel. Diversity of speech is no doubt the result rather than the cause of the dispersion and estrangement of peoples. It is probably true that very many races of men had their earliest homes in or about Mesopotamia. That country was, perhaps, the chief cradle of the human race, the centre from which the great dispersions of mankind began. But the confusion of tongues did not precede the dispersion; it followed upon it in the slow course of years. The story of the confusion of tongues is, therefore, not true historically. But it is very true as allegory. We know to our cost that folk who speak the same language can be thorough aliens to one another. Yet in the deepest sense a common language does indicate a certain fundamental community of soul. Hence the arrogance that destroys society is well represented as being the destroyer of common speech: it breaks down the means of communication between heart and heart. And that is the cardinal sin—satanic presumption and self-will destroying human communion and creating a mad muddle of disunion in place of it. As the Holy Ghost in man means concord, fellowship, life, so the Satan in man means discord, war and death. Whether it exhibit itself as civil tyranny, or as religious intolerance, or as individual lust and greed, this arrogant self-will is the disruptive element in society. Out of it comes nothing but confusion and overthrow. Age by age it foment the strife of tongues and threatens to bring to ruin the structure of civilization.

But we have an antidote to Babel.

In an upper chamber on the roof of a Jewish house there sit together a little band of humble, contrite, wondering

men—their memories stored with gracious, sad pictures of One now lost to sight whom they had deserted in the hour of His agony. In a passion of shame and revived loyalty they are met to make what amends they can and to carry on His work with such powers as they possess. The atmosphere is altogether one of humble contrition, of eager comradeship, of trembling hope. Each man's heart is full of a new sense of mystic life and love. Selfish instincts of pride and fear are dead in them. God's Holy Spirit fills them with love, joy, peace, long-suffering, patience, tenderness. And as they sit in fellowship, talking of past and future, planning how best to fulfil the commands of their Lord, encouraging each other with mutual zeal, they are caught into an ecstasy : they become transfigured, each one conscious of the spell of God upon him, each one feeling that veritable divine presence and impress as surely as if the hand of God were laid upon his head. The very air about them seems like a living thing : it is as if a mighty wind blew about the house. "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and sat upon each of them. And they began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." And when a motley congregation of many nationalities gathered about them, their message was understood equally well by every one, says St. Luke. The doom of Babel was repealed. Just as in the ancient legend the devil's spirit of arrogance in man had brought disintegration, confusion and social ruin, so in this story of Pentecost the divine spirit of love and humility in man brings understanding, communion and vital peace. In the pomp of Babel men's mouths were filled with alien tongues ; in the meekness of Pentecost the alien tongues become a common language understood by all. And in place of warring races with contradictory aims you have the beginning of the Holy Catholic Church—that universal brotherhood built upon one loyalty, one faith, one baptism, deriving from,

and living in, and moving to the one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all.

It is a difficult point to determine precisely what St. Luke understood by the *glossolalia*, or speaking in "other tongues." Elsewhere in the New Testament it clearly refers to a kind of ecstatic utterance characteristic of the early Church, and, perhaps, partially reproduced at later periods of great evangelical revival. Such ecstatic speaking has been noted among the Franciscans, the Jansenists, the Quakers, the Methodists, the Irvingites. People are carried out of themselves by an emotional exaltation, and speak they know not what—an utterance which does not seem their own at all. In such speech the actual words may not be very intelligible. But the emotion which prompts the speech is intelligible enough, and bystanders may easily become deeply moved by it. There is nothing to associate this gift of tongues with the use of foreign languages unknown to the speaker. But St. Luke's usage of the term seems to suggest this miraculous character. His tendency to heighten the miraculous character of his stories is one of his obvious traits as an author. But there may have been special influences at work upon his narrative of the first Christian Pentecost. For we gather from Philo and other sources that it was supposed, in Jewish tradition, that when God revealed the Law on Sinai, He did so through the appearance of a flame from heaven, out of the midst of which sounded forth a voice. Further tradition declared that this original divine voice became seven voices, and from these was divided again into seventy separate tongues, so that there was a great host of voices proclaiming the Decalogue, "like sparks leaping from an anvil," presumably in order that peoples of different speech the world over might all understand this proclamation of Divine Law. And this episode of the proclamation of the Law was commemorated in Jewish ritual at the Feast of Pentecost, the concluding part of which was called the Feast of

Trumpets, because it celebrated the time when there sounded from heaven "a trumpet's voice which reached forthwith to the ends of the universe."

It can hardly be doubted that the association of these ideas with the Pentecostal Feast—the tradition of the descent of God symbolized in miraculous flames, and the inauguration of the old covenant in world-wide language—has influenced St. Luke's account of the inauguration of the Christian Church on the supposed anniversary of this ancient miracle. The new Christian dispensation could not have had a less august and marvellous beginning than its predecessor.

If the old Law had been proclaimed by myriad voices for the benefit of all mankind, then surely the new Gospel had been proclaimed in no more restricted fashion. And St. Luke had fact enough to go upon in his assertion that folk from many provinces had understood and accepted the glad tidings. Doubtless they did so, not because the apostles suddenly spoke in various foreign languages, but because the ecstatic talk of these inspired men was understood well enough in its general meaning—the emotion of it was caught, even if its dialect was strange to many of the listeners. As a matter of fact, Greek, in its various dialects, was spoken throughout the long list of countries enumerated by Luke, and an address in Greek would have been understood by them all. One's conclusion is, then, that the *glossolalia* of Pentecost is identical with the *glossolalia* of the Epistles. Only in course of time, as the story of this supreme episode was handed about, it took on a stronger colouring of the miraculous. The general understanding of the apostles' ecstatic talk by the diverse crowd came to be thought of as the result of a miraculous communication of foreign languages; and that shape of the story has influenced St. Luke's narrative. There was an unconscious transformation of the facts of the case, probably influenced by the traditional legends associated with Pentecost.

If the people gathered at Jerusalem had been even more diverse in speech than was really the case, they might still have appreciated something of the apostle's meaning, albeit the actual words were foreign to them. We are told that when St. Vincent Ferrer, the Spanish missionary, was preaching to crowds of foreigners he managed to make his Spanish talk intelligible to Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, or Belgians alike, by reason of the passion and dramatic vividness of his eloquence. The whole man spoke : it was no mere matter of words. St. Francis Xavier laid the foundations of Christianity in India and beyond it, despite little or no knowledge of the languages of the lands he came to. After all, words are but one instrument of communication. And sympathy is a wonderfully good interpreter : where good-will exists there can be no impassable barriers of dumbness and unintelligibility.

Hence in this great narrative of Pentecost, which is the central, lasting symbol of the descent of God's Spirit into the souls of men, the pre-eminent feature is the breaking down of the barriers of alien speech, the welding of diverse peoples into a single communion. Pentecost marks, as it were, the pole of a spiritual current opposite to that of Babel. It signalizes a revolution from the era of estrangements and wars and sectional animosity to the era of reconciliation and peace and catholicism ; from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. And so, year by year, at Whitsuntide we give thanks for the gracious descent of the Holy Ghost into humanity, by which our disruptive, deadly self-love is slowly being replaced by the fellowship of the love of God. The story of Pentecost is the symbol and promise of God's new era for man.

Yet, age after age—and so appallingly in this our own age—we see the resurgence of aggressive arrogance, always bringing in its wake some intolerable distress. The Czarisms and Kaiserisms plunge the world into war.

Military dictation works havoc in Armenia and the Congo, in Korea and in Ireland. Hymns of hate are gustfully sung. International treaties are written with fear at the elbow and vengeance holding the pen. We out-babel Babel. But amid all the satanic clamour of presumptuous selfishness against God's commonwealth, we turn our memories to Pentecost, where a real historic event took place, a beginning of incalculable moment, which must and shall find its fulfilment in the complete transformation of the world ; and we still pin our faith and hope to that universal fellowship which God's Spirit is urgent to bring to pass on earth. Just as in those early hours of the Christian Church the believers had all things in common, establishing an equal fraternity, so in the fulness of time all human beings, having also come to believe in common, shall enjoy an equal fraternity. These hostile groups of armed nations, these cherished hatreds, these cries for vengeance, these despotic dragoonings of weaker folks—all our Babylonian presumption in every damnable form thereof—shall be swept away by the besom of divine wrath. And then shall all alienating barriers be broken down ; or, as the Apocalypse puts it, "there shall be no more sea." There shall be but one heart and one speech among all men. There shall be the Commonwealth of God, founded in meekness, good-will and humility. We need continually to set our hearts afresh upon this ideal, and to be no whit dismayed by its apparent temporary overthrows. The world does move onward into unity, and the last word about it is not Babel but Pentecost, not disunion but communion, not estrangement but understanding, not war but peace.

The law of human progress, as Henry George maintains in his *Progress and Poverty*, is association in equality. Human advance depends upon our drawing together and forgetting our alienations and suspicions. But this in turn depends upon our endeavouring after equality in our relationships. History is one long illustration of how, when

inequality has prevailed in society, decay and disruption have followed. One after another the older civilizations have thus been ruined. The arrogant claims of individuals and classes have undermined the democratic fellowship, and the inevitable penalty has then fallen from heaven. This is the chief key to a right understanding of history. You may judge the rise and fall of nations by applying to them this maxim: "The principle of human progress is association in equality." Wherever and whenever a blustering, domineering, supercilious, or privilege-loving caste arises, the common weal is broken and the state is doomed. Wherever and whenever justice, sympathy, forbearance, civic serviceableness, and kindred virtues prevail, then you see prosperity and vital growth. The builders of Babel are always scattered, but the meek shall inherit the earth.

Let those who call themselves by the Christian name, who look back gratefully to those first beginnings of the Christian society through so stupendous an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and who believe in the power of that Spirit to weld all mankind into one body, grasp firmly this Pentecostal ideal, and hold it up in the midst of men's strife and prejudice until the noise of Babel dies away; and in the quietness of reconciliation we begin to see the flame of God's Presence burning about the heads of our fellow-men, and to hear them talking in a speech we understand—heart calling to heart far deeper than the reach of any words—until we be joined with them in a holy unity, where the Christ is all and in all. From that upper room in Jerusalem the blessed contagion has been spreading all these centuries, with many an arrest, indeed, but with many a revival too. It cannot fail, it cannot cease, until God's purpose is accomplished and the whole world incorporated by the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

IV

AN INTERCESSION
FOR SODOM

Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven ; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of those cities, and that which grew upon the ground.

GENESIS xix. 24, 25.

And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked ? . . . That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked : and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee : shall not the Judge of all the earth do right ? . . . Peradventure ten righteous shall be found there. And the Lord said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake.

GENESIS xviii. 23, 25, 32.

IV

AN INTERCESSION FOR SODOM

THE great trench of the Jordan valley is the most extraordinary geological formation on earth. There are one or two areas in Asia and Africa which sink below sea-level : the neighbourhood of the Caspian Sea touches a depth of a hundred and fifty feet below the ocean, and the salt marshes of the Sahara sink over a hundred feet farther still. These are the most notable depressions apart from the Jordan valley. But they are altogether dwarfed by the latter. This great uncanny gash into the bowels of the earth reaches, at its lowest point in the bed of the Dead Sea, a depth of some two thousand six hundred feet beneath the ocean surface. And this depth is reached not in a broad gradually shelving valley, but by precipitous shuddering descent into a narrow cutting only a few miles across. The two great limestone ridges on either side of it—the hills of Palestine and of Moab, which are carried on northward into the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon—being formed countless ages ago at the bottom of the ocean, were apparently squeezed upward by lateral pressure through the earth's shrinkage until they rose above water leaving between them a narrow arm of the sea stretching up from the Indian Ocean into the Lebanon valley. Then by a prodigious crack or fault the bed of this narrow sea sank as if it were falling into the bottomless pit, while a ridge of limestone squeezed up transversely across the southern end of it shut out the ocean, cutting off its lower reaches where we now see the Gulf of Akabah, and left a salt lake two hundred

miles in length. This lake freshened in the course of time, as the glaciers of Lebanon melted into it, and thereafter began to dry up—the different beach-levels being still traceable up and down its banks, and suggesting sudden subsidences due to volcanic disturbance rather than a steady imperceptible shrinkage. And so at last that unique chasm in the earth's surface reached its present form of a sub-tropical valley deepening steeply southward, with its two lakes at the northern end and its swiftly tumbling river—the Jordan or Down-comer—pouring itself into the great southern lake, never freed from its saltiness, and so deeply pitched in the bowels of the earth that its intense evaporation balances the inflow and keeps it of a constant size. Nowhere else is the earth gashed to such depth as here. And the scene thus created is a perpetual astonishment.

While north of the Dead Sea the Jordan valley revels in a tropical luxuriance of vegetation, about that Sea itself, save at one or two oases, there is stark lifelessness. Its brilliant blue waters are thick as oil and bitter with intense brine ; its shores are whitened and glistening ; above its surface hangs the perpetual haze of its evaporation, like steam from a devil's cauldron. It is brilliant with light and colour, and it is deadly still. In addition to the salt marshes at its lower end there exist about its coast various springs of petroleum, and the earth is full of bituminous and sulphurous deposits. Lumps of bitumen are often found floating on the sea itself.

This waste and bitter hollow, with its inflammable earth, has in all likelihood been the scene of some such devastations as our Book of Genesis records. The lower reaches of the Dead Sea, beyond the promontory which almost cuts it in two, are in such striking contrast to the upper reaches—the former being only a few feet deep, while the latter plunge to the huge depth of thirteen hundred feet—as to suggest that they are a comparatively recent extension of the sea, brought about, perhaps, by some eruptive

change of level. Here in ancient times *may* have been the plain on which were situate the doomed cities. But there has for long been vigorous debate as to whether these cities lay north or south of the Dead Sea, and no certain solution of the problem is possible. To my own inexperienced judgment it looks as though the weight of evidence were decidedly in favour of the southern site, where the hill Usdum seems to preserve the name Sodom; where the traditional site of Zoar is fixed by a village still bearing a similar name; and where the pillar of rock-salt, popularly called Lot's Wife, is standing, or was standing in recent times. We cannot be certain about it. But such a conclusion is attractive to one's imagination: the sinister appearance of that southern coast of the Dead Sea harmonizes with the grim old tale of conflagration and doom. It is not difficult to conceive some earth explosion in that fantastic abyss—which was created by and subject to such turbulence—setting into a blaze the inflammable bitumen and sulphur; flinging it up sky-high, maybe, so that it rained down upon the helpless cities, and burnt them off the earth; much as Herculaneum and Pompeii were destroyed by the eruptions of Vesuvius. We can but guess at what actually took place. But it is scarcely doubtful that some lurid and appalling destruction of cities in the Dead Sea area actually happened; so sharply striking the imagination of the ancient world that the story of it was handed down with lingering terror as one of the outstanding dramas of history, and preached about as one of the most exemplary instances of divine judgment.

And this very awful event took place, we are told, in the lifetime of Abraham.

Now with the advent of Abraham into the Genesis narrative it is obvious that we pass out of the region of the traditional myths which Israel, from remote antiquity, shared in common with her Semitic neighbours, and enter upon records with some substantial basis of remembered

history—records coloured, no doubt, by legendary imagination, and even incorporating a mythic element here and there, yet records of actual and notable men who stand out conspicuous on the horizons of national memory. There may be some justice in the claim that these patriarchal figures stand to represent tribes. Perhaps so. Perhaps some of their recorded deeds are but picturesque expressions of the inter-relationship of various clans. But common sense will hardly allow the individuality of the patriarchs to be explained away by over-pressing such ingenious suggestions. Simple-minded people remember and relate not complex social movements but dramatic individual deeds. Early history consists in the biography of picked men. They may be tribal types, and some tribal history may be expressed in their stories. But the tribe would have no story if it had no hero. An Abraham or a Jacob, an Esau or a Lot, may signify a tribe, but he signifies first of all an individual hero, whose name was handed down the generations in many a camp-fire yarn. Such men become idealized as they sink into the distant past. The records of their acts may be trimmed into such shape as best serves the symbolic expression of later religious ideas or historical surmises : for we all tend to shape the past as we should like it to have been ; we tidy it up, eliminating what seems to have no significance for our own ideals, and cutting a sharp outline round the men and the events we want to remember, so that they stand out for ever as types for our admiration, encouragement or warning. Allowance must be made for this fictional or legendary quality in history. Mere chronicle is a dust-bin from which our dramatic instinct sifts and selects what it values for practical guidance or for imaginative pleasure. It embellishes these things with a measure of decorative romance. But they are grounded in sober chronicle. They are neither mere creations of fancy nor mere types of dimly surmised social movements, but blurred and distant visions of great men whose personal

prowess impressed itself indelibly on the memories of their descendants.

And the personality which stands at the source of Israel's distinctive history is that of Abraham, the great nomad sheikh, who broke out of Chaldea and, after long wanderings, settled with his growing clan on the uplands of Palestine. It was a no-man's land. Other tribes had their villages here and there; but the moors and wildernesses were open pasturage for any wandering folk who came thither. The regular rotation of a tribe about the same area would give in time a sort of proprietary right there, as it does in Arabia to-day. And from time to time, as the clans with their great herds became unwieldy, certain families within them would swarm off and find new pastures sufficiently remote from the old to avoid provocative competition. Thus Abraham's clan, which had settled first of all in the district about Bethel, came at length to a crisis which necessitated its splitting in two and moving away from the arid hills of Benjamin to new shepherding grounds.

Abraham and Lot, standing on some summit near Bethel, survey the prospect; and Abraham magnanimously offers the first choice of direction to his younger kinsman. Eastward of them lay the great cutting of the Jordan valley, and the eyes of Lot were caught by its tropical luxuriance, "like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." He made his choice to settle there, and, going down off the hills, "he pitched his tent toward Sodom"; while Abraham went southward along the hill-ridges to the fertile valley of Hebron embosomed in the uplands of Judah.

Here there came to him, as he sat at his tent door in the heat of the day, three strangers. The old tale of their visit is as mysterious as it is charming. Apparently more than one hand has been at work upon the narrative, and, to one editor anyhow, the three strangers are no earthly beings but the Lord himself with attendant angels. The human visitors are transfigured into a theophany. God

walks the earth in human form, and lunches in Abraham's tent under the oaks of Mamre on beef and butter and milk. Such an idea of theophany can only have arisen out of an intense impression that the visit of the three strangers had a providential significance : that in and through them God communicated His will to Abraham. He who made the winds His angels and the lightning His messenger could much more use human instruments for His revelations. It seems probable, therefore, that an original story of three human visitors, whose visit stood out in memory as a remarkable portent, came to be interpreted as a visit of angels—nay, of the Lord Himself. By a daring and picturesque anthropomorphism the old writer is expressing the conviction that God speaks to man through man, that our fellow-creatures may verily reveal God to us. We entertain angels, we entertain God Himself, unawares, when we entertain men who contrive to bring home to us some fresh message concerning the divine will.

Whence these men came we have not the faintest trace, except that they know the conditions of life in Sodom, and have, too, a shrewd estimate of the worth and growing power of Abraham. From the story, as tradition developed it, we gather that their converse under the oaks revolved around two themes—the birth of a son to Abraham's chief wife, and the great and mighty nation that should thus spring from his loins ; and the wickedness and coming doom of those cities of the plain near which Lot had made his settlement. The possibility of Sarah's child-bearing and the wickedness, even the danger, of Sodom, may well have been the substance of their talk, though the historian has no doubt reported, or rather composed, their conversation in the light of after events. He makes them, or God speaking by them, predict the happy issue in the one case and the terrible doom in the other. But is it straining reality too much to suppose that these strangers did impress upon Abraham some predictions in these matters which were after-

wards shown to have been quite miraculous in foresight? Why else should their visit have stood out in memory as a veritable visitation of God? We may be sure that their shrewd surmises, their discussion of probable events, were not couched in the terms of precise prediction the story gives to us; but that something in the recollected conversation of these strangers just before the destruction of Sodom gave suggestion and basis for the story as tradition developed it we may surely regard as likely enough.

The morals of Sodom were apparently notorious, and the gaunt, austere herdsmen of the hills must often have discussed together the life of those luxurious and lascivious cities lying in the valley pit far beneath them. Abraham had a special concern in the matter now that his kinsmen had moved down into that enervating tropical air, where their hardihood and wholesomeness would so easily be undermined. And if the magnanimity which characterizes this great patriarch in all the stories told of him be indeed true to fact, we may be sure that Abraham had many prayerful thoughts for the safety of Lot and his family. The magnificent narrative of Abraham's intercession is in all probability a late insertion into the narrative; but it is inserted because it was felt to be appropriate to Abraham's traditional character. Such a man, it was thought, must have felt the pity and the moral concern for justice which the reflection of a later age certainly felt in face of such terrific physical disaster. Could the Judge of all the earth commit a wrong? Could He indiscriminately slay the innocent with the wicked? Ugly accidents brought home this problem to Jewish thinkers. It could not be that God was unjust. And so they argued that it must have been only the wicked that were slain; that God would have saved even Sodom if only a handful of righteous folk had dwelt in it. They did not seem to remember the number of innocent children who must have been there, as the much later and kindlier morality of the Book of

Jonah remembers them in Nineveh. They were still in the region of thought when a man's whole family was unquestioningly punished with him for his sin. Neither had they reached to the insight of the Book of Job which knew that misfortune is not to be always accounted an accurate reflex of wrong-doing. To earlier thought outward disaster was solely due to inward baseness. Yet the destruction of whole cities together hardly suited such a theory. The author of this story of intercession is concerned to show that Sodom was so saturated with wickedness that, against all probability, not ten decent men were discoverable therein. And hence it was not God's indiscriminate wrath, no lack of justice on His part toward an innocent minority, but strictly a fitting of the punishment to the crime, which brought about the destruction of Sodom. God would have had mercy, the thought is, if that innocent minority had existed; but to the writer's mind it cannot have existed, or God would be found acting unrighteously.

But we cannot miss the tender compassion of the pleadings put into the mouth of Abraham. The old writer's good nature and tender-heartedness are struggling with an inadequate theory of the retributions of Providence. He is eager to plead even for a Sodom. He believes his great-hearted hero Abraham must have so pleaded, when he was made aware of Sodom's overhanging doom. There is a real evangelical compassion in this narrative which stands alone in the earlier Bible writings and reminds one of the voice of Hosea. It may perhaps date from the great prophetic period, but its appearance in this ancient patriarchal context makes it peculiarly moving.

Possibly we may find a trace of Abraham's active concern for Sodom, or at least for Lot's family there, in the latter part of the story, which tells how two of the strangers, having left Mamre, make for the Dead Sea valley, and visit Lot, and are instrumental in helping his escape from the threatening catastrophe. This may be a record of

actual urgent pressure brought to bear on Lot by Abraham that he should tear himself away from a neighbourhood so notoriously wicked—a piece of advice acted upon in time to prevent Lot's tribe being destroyed when the great catastrophe soon afterwards occurred. There must be some ground underlying the persistent tradition of Lot having dwelt in Sodom and yet having escaped into the hills before the conflagration. On the basis of such fact there sprang up the folk-tale about the pillar of salt ; just as, in a thousand other spots, quaintly shaped rocks have given rise to humorous or terrifying legends often associated with some famous old local personage. Lot was the man who escaped from Sodom : but this queer rock on the line of his escape, like an old woman looking back over her shoulder—why, this must be Lot's wife turned into stone as a punishment for her curiosity. Let all inquisitive women take heed, and be prompt to obey their husbands ! And so the old contorted lump of rock-salt stood for ages, with its nickname of Lot's Wife, to witness to the story of this flaring disaster grown dim with the passage of the years, and to the tradition of a righteous Remnant that escaped.

At a far later date in Jewish history the doctrine of a salvable Remnant of the people took a central place in prophecy. The nation as a whole was despaired of, but there was a minority that might and should be saved. It was not strong enough to leaven the whole lump with righteousness, but it could separate itself from the evil mass, and make itself a holy seed for the future. In such a movement of thought we see, as it were, the Puritan view of Churchmanship as against the Catholic. It despairs of the general salvation, and so far is weak in faith and hard in judgment ; but this very despair is born out of the intensity of its moral idealism, its sense of the necessity of absofness from the world, its passionate pursuit of an arduous spiritual adventure. To minds or to moods of

this Puritan quality salvation always appears as a breathless escape from a doomed world, a solitary pilgrim's progress out of a city ripe for burning ; and the constant motto of such minds is, "Remember Lot's wife." To turn wistful or curious backward looks upon that renounced realm of wickedness is to compromise and falter in one's effort. It is to be paralysed and petrified. It is to lose salvation, and stand for ever in the suburbs of Sodom as a spectacle of indecision, a monument of the doom of irresoluteness. Such puritanic doctrine is tonic and stimulating. It braces the will to resolution and prompts to real inward strife that we may make our calling and election sure. But the Puritan and the Catholic standpoint each needs the other. In the search after individual escape from doom we may easily forget the evangel of that divine good-will that would fain reverse the doom and save the whole body. Lot was right in seeking to escape contamination and to save his soul alive. He was the Puritan in us all—the necessary Puritan. But we miss in him the note of Abraham's intercession—the note of the catholic evangel which is not so bent on getting saved as on saving, which gets itself saved by serving in pity a poor, blundering, vicious world that needs a deal of praying for.

The prayer of Abraham links itself up with that vision of Ezekiel centuries later, where the prophet rises above the desperate hope of a mere remnant that is salvable, and dreams of the new spiritual temple in Israel, from beneath the altar of which a divine spring bubbles up and flows away down the Kidron gorge, swelling and swelling into a great river. Through that torn gorge in the Judæan hills it turns eastward, gushing and leaping down toward Jericho, till it enters the Jordan valley and pours itself into the Dead Sea. And lo ! that bitter sea is quickened into freshness ; its borders once again bloom with gardens ; its surface is covered with fishing craft ; the whole of that awful pit of desolation where Sodom had been doomed

is athrill with life again ; the fishermen crowd its coasts from Engedi to Eneglaim, and trees yield their life-giving fruit from month to month. And so, in Ezekiel's dear dream, a vital religion shall redeem even the blasted site of old Sodom. No region of life is so waste and blighted but that the waters of a true faith shall not convert it into a garden of the Lord. Even Sodom is reclaimable. Even the Dead Sea shall be resurrected into life. The vision of those scorched and smoking ruins under the flaming hail of brimstone with which the Genesis story fills our minds—like some infernal Dantesque circle, leaving that terrific pit of the Ghôr to fascinate us horribly like the mouth of hell itself—is thus counteracted by the exultant religious hope and the unforgettable poetry of Ezekiel, who looks down into that great chasm of the Jordan and sees it again, as Lot first saw it, “like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt.” And the Old Testament thus finally leaves this strange and awful site of the cities of the plain not under the light of judgment but of redemption, not doomed by sin but healed by grace.

Even with so soft a surge and an increasing,
Drunk of the sand and thwarted of the clod,
Stilled and astir and checked and never-ceasing
Spreadeth the great wave of the grace of God ;

Bears to the marishes and bitter places
Healing for hurt and for their poisons balm,
Isle after isle in infinite embraces
Floods and enfolds and fringes with the palm.

This ancient intercession for Sodom is like a first faint whisper of the larger Christian hope. Sin must for ever bring doom, and the hell it creates for itself is an obvious reality. But the human heart pleads against an utter and irreversible destruction. In the wickedest quarters are there not some elements of good which may bring deliverance in the hour of judgment? We must needs hope so. And hence in our creed we postulate the descent

of Christ into hell. It may be argued that this phrase implied no more than an approach to the ancients in Sheol, who had died before Christ's advent on earth, so that His evangel was effectively offered to all men of all ages. But the general Christian heart will read more into it than that. It will be taken as symbol of the truth that the gospel of forgiveness is never closed; that everywhere in God's universe, in whatever hells the spirits of men may be dwelling, there is still an offer of salvation and a place for repentance and recovery. For we believe in the forgiveness of sins, the utter forthgiving and deliverance of mankind from all evil, as the goal of God's purpose. And we believe there is an eternal intercession of the Christ on behalf of all men which, though it cannot prevent the doom of sin, can and will at last exorcise the sin and so reverse the doom and change our hell to heaven.

The grace of God—struggling for expression in Abraham's intercession, finding a surer vehicle in Ezekiel's dream of the redeemed land, and winning final utterance through Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, who is the same yesterday, to-day and for ever—shall yet bring our Sodoms and Gomorrahs into penitence and healing, and it shall be tolerable for them at the Last Day.

V

THE SACRIFICE OF
THE BELOVED SON

And they came to the place which God had told him of ; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him : for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me.

GENESIS xxii. 9-12.

V

THE SACRIFICE OF THE BELOVED SON

OUTSIDE the ancient city of Carthage there lay a patch of thorny scrub or jungle held in superstitious dread as a spot inhabited by dragons. And within this desolation there stood a terrifying sanctuary where human sacrifices were made. A great idol figure with outstretched arms was here erected on the edge of a pit in which a furnace was prepared. Then a naked child would be laid across the arms of the idol, and thence rolled off into the fire that flared below. So the child was delivered to the god, who committed it to the flames. This horrid spectacle from old Carthage is, perhaps, the most gruesome example recorded of the persistent practice of child-sacrifice among the ancients. But it existed almost anywhere ; and in particular it was rife throughout the Semitic world. The Book of Kings records, for instance, how Mesha, the king of Moab, who had revolted from his servitude to Israel and was being hard pressed by the siege of his capital city, as a last resort took his eldest son and offered him in sacrifice on the city wall to his god Chemosh. We know, too, how the Israelites themselves fell into this practice again and again, notably in the evil reign of Manasseh, burning their children in Topheth—the fire-place—in the valley of Hinnom : a memory the horror of which sunk so deeply into Hebrew imagination that this valley of Hinnom or Gehenna became to later ages the usual symbol of hell.

The horrible wickedness of Manasseh provoked reaction, and there followed in the reign of his successor, Josiah,

one of the most sweeping revolutions in religious and social law which Israel's changeful history can show. It was the period of the publication of Deuteronomy and the preaching of Jeremiah. And the literature of this period denounces the practice of child-sacrifice: "They built up the high places of Baal in the valley of Hinnom," says Jeremiah, "to cause their sons and daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, neither came it into My mind, that they should do this abomination." And so we find that, among his other reforms, Josiah "defiled Topheth that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech."

In the still later reforms of Ezra's period, when the Priestly Code was formulated, it was still considered necessary to lay down stringent laws against the sacrifice of children. In Leviticus xx. the death penalty is assigned to anyone found perpetrating this horrid crime; and it is attacked with such emphasis that one can hardly doubt that even at that late period there was real danger of the recrudescence of this primitive custom.

But centuries before this, in the splendid dawn of literary prophecy in the eighth century, we find Micah raising his voice in vehement scorn and detestation of a religious outlook that could tolerate so immoral a practice: "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Micah is denouncing animal-sacrifice in general, and child-sacrifice as the summit of frantic folly. The sacrifice which God requires is justice and mercy and devoutness. Animal-sacrifice was, of course, incessant at that day, and Micah would hardly have weakened the force of his plea by dragging in an attack on child-sacrifice if that, too, had not recurrently occurred as a part of religious ritual.

It is evident, then, that this practice was an ever-present danger in Israel right up to the post-exilic period, despite

the denunciations of Micah in the eighth century and of Jeremiah in the seventh ; and we know, as a matter of fact, that its most flagrant and deliberate outbreak was in the time of Jeremiah's own childhood under Manasseh.

In view of this, all the more astonishing becomes the unforgettable story of Abraham and Isaac. This story belongs to the earliest document in the Pentateuch, and must have been written pretty well a century before Micah's time. Even if the story were made up at the time of writing it is significant as the earliest protest against child-sacrifice. But it purports to be a true story from the life of Abraham ; and, though doubtless coloured and shaped by its passage down the ages, there is no reason to suppose that it may not rest upon an actual experience in the life of the patriarch, just as much as any other traditional story about him. This early author was not a fiction-writer, making up stories out of his own head. He was but gathering together the popular tales of his people—old tales that had been in circulation from the far past—and weaving them into a consecutive history.

This tale, then, is a very ancient one. And it shows Abraham as, indeed, one of the great moral innovators of our race. This hardy old desert tribesman, redoubtable for his warriorship, admirable for his stately Arab courtesy, and strangely distinguished as a man of deep meditation, a dreamer of dreams, had veritable revelations from God. In him the ethical consciousness of mankind took definite upward steps. No one can miss the brooding piety of the man, or his passionate sincerity. He is of the stuff that shapes into sainthood. Out of Chaldea he emerges under a sense of divine calling—some inner pressure bidding him leave that old idolatrous civilization that he might carve out a destiny for himself beyond the wilderness, and build a new people austere, simple, devout, to do a work for God on earth that he could scarce guess at. And now he has found his home on these upland pastures of Palestine,

and his only son is growing up to manhood, the incarnation of all that dim magnificent promise for the future which he cherished in his heart as God's own pledge—the happy burden of his life-long dreams and prayers. But was he not too happy and prosperous? God was blessing him superabundantly. It was surely too good to last. Dire things take place in this world. What if God were to test his faith by suddenly cutting off this darling son? Could his fidelity stand the shock? Would he still trust God's promise of the glorious race that was to issue from his loins? He wondered. Why, there were people who even sacrificed their children voluntarily to God! Dare he ever make so overwhelming a sacrifice? He—so peculiarly called by God and so favoured by providence—would he fail to rise to the level of these men in costly offering? Perhaps these very thoughts and doubts in his mind—might they not themselves be a divine prompting to a duty he had so far been blind to? Might not the very promise embodied in Isaac be but an extra test of his willingness to give up all to God? God was his suzerain, to whom he owed everything. He must hold back nothing whatsoever. Abraham felt himself faced with the same call to sacrifice that our young countryman, Rupert Brooke, felt and so tellingly recorded :

These laid the world away ; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth ; gave up the years to be,
Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,
That men call age ; and those who would have been,
Their sons they gave, their immortality.

So Abraham, brooding over his duty to God, felt an imperious call to give up even his son—not, by his own death, to renounce some prospective child of the future, but to offer this actual dear lad who embodied all his hopes—the instrument of his own earthly immortality in the great race that should develop from him. It was the most severe struggle that any man's faith could be put to. Yet Abraham nerved

himself to the task. Taking Isaac with him, he journeys from home to some hill-sanctuary, builds up an altar there, and ties the boy upon it. In an agony of wild resolution he raises the knife to stab the terrified child. But his hand is held. At the last instant his conscience hears a new word. It cannot be that God demands this horrid act. To be willing to yield up his son to God—yes, that indeed was necessary. But by this act of deliberate murder? No, a thousand times no! Such a notion turned God into a devil. It could not be true. It was a fog of superstition that had overspread his devoutness. God knew he was willing to dedicate his son to any hard sacrifice that life really demanded. But his God was a God of life and hope and promise, not to be propitiated by a wanton murder of precious childhood. His second thoughts were God's real angel. And so in a sudden happy glow of enlightenment he tears loose the bonds and lifts the boy off the altar—all the God-given fatherhood in him rising in exultant victory over the dreadful superstition that had almost twisted his devoutness into crime.

Abraham was challenging the whole outlook and practice of his times. But he did not doubt his revelation. It was the Lord's angel who had held his hand, the Lord's message that rang in his ears. Standing beside that altar on the lonely hill in Palestine he had won a decisive spiritual victory for mankind, and lifted our race out of one dark fog of superstition. Henceforth Abraham's people should know a truer law of sacrifice. And the best among them did so. Despite the falling back of the stupid populace again and again into heathen rites of child-murder, there was nevertheless a succession of great voices in Israel who took up the lesson of this dramatic story and repeated it from age to age, until the old heathen barbarism was finally beaten off the field before the advance of a purer, gentler faith.

This old tale of Abraham's sacrifice is, therefore, one

of the great landmarks in the religious history of mankind. It marks for ever the condemnation of child-murder as if that were a thing desirable to the heart of God. But if we consider it discriminatingly we see that it marks not the abandonment but the transmutation of child-sacrifice. The sacrifice of all that is most precious—that is, its dedication, the yielding of it to the service of God—is a permanent demand of religion. And the most exacting of all sacrifices is still that of the child. It is far easier for a true man to yield himself to risk of danger and death than it is for him to stand aside perforce and let his children run such risk. We heard much in the Great War of parents giving up their sons for England and civilization. We heard too much of it at times. There was a touch of cheapness and insincerity in the reflected pride of parents who saw their boys in khaki, while they themselves, perhaps, were doing well out of the war at home. And yet there was sacrifice—the greatest of all possible sacrifice—for many a parent who was prevented from joining in the fight himself and had to stand by and see the son, who was all his family hope, go out to face the guns. Where love was vehement, it was, in all soberness, a sharper sacrifice to give one's son than to give oneself, however much the cynic may dispute it. David's agonized cry rings true, and is echoed in every generous parent's heart: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" It is axiomatic that a man's farthest reach of sacrifice is not to yield his own life but his child's—that life which is the better part of himself, with all the promise of the future in it, and which, once gone, leaves only the older withering part of himself to eat out its forlorn remnant of life on earth, a limbless, sterile, disenchanted thing.

Many readers will remember the story of Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She had been dragged through every possible defilement of slavery, but so long as her children were

preserved to her she kept some measure of hope. At length the final blow came. They were sold. And passing a calaboose one day she suddenly heard a child's voice, and her little boy ran screaming to her and caught desperately on to her dress. Rough men snatched the boy back, and carried him away swearing that they would give him a lesson he would never forget. Poor Cassy turned and ran, with the screams of the beaten child ringing in her ears. Something seemed to snap in her head, and she fell into delirium. Far, far harder to bear than all her own pain and ignominy was the agony of her boy, whom she was powerless to save. Yes, the parent heart is hit harder through its children than through its own flesh. The supreme sacrifice is the sacrifice of the child.

Hence, when we come to the New Testament, and men are seeking for some human symbol whereby to interpret the passionate love of God, of which Christ had aroused the conviction in them, it is to this idea of child-sacrifice that they turn, and declare that in the life and death of Jesus what we really see is God Himself acting on the plane of man's own most exacting and heart-rending devotion—God yielding up His only-begotten Son to redeem the world. It is a figure of speech, of course. But it is the only adequate figure of speech to express the Christian conviction of what God's love was doing in and through Jesus Christ. Jesus had brought home to men a new revelation of God. He had made them realize God not as an austere sovereign but as a father and passionate lover, toiling and agonizing to lift men out of their sins into blessedness. They saw the death of Jesus as a domestic tragedy for the heart of God—not as something God wanted and coldly, calculatingly arranged or allowed; but as God's own last effort of costly sacrifice to win a stubborn world. Jesus himself had pictured God as the owner of the vineyard, who, when all His other messengers had been rejected and abused, at last sent His only son: "They will reverence my son," He

said—"surely they will reverence my son." So God had unavailingly sent His servants the prophets; and at last was forced to the supreme sacrifice—giving up all, giving up more than life itself, or what a man values far more than life itself, his offspring: "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son that they who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life." It is a very sublime figure. And to men who know the cost of giving up their children to awful risks for the world's sake, nothing else could so well bring home the sublime passion of God's redeeming love for His creatures.

F. D. Maurice, in a passage of very deep and just reflection in his *Kingdom of Christ*, has pointed out that the essential idea underlying the old stories of God's covenant with Abraham was that it was a covenant with a *family*. The tribes among which Abraham was dwelling were sensual, and their rites of worship were sensual, and in this sensuality was involved a neglect of family bonds. To give witness against this sensuality, for the truth of an invisible and righteous God, was therefore to give witness at the same time to the sacredness of family bonds. "The notion of a Being exercising power over men, seen in the clouds, and heard in the winds, this was that which the *world* entertained, and trembled, till utter corruption brought in utter atheism. That there is a God *related* to men and made known to men through their human relations, this was the faith of Abraham, the beginner of the Church on earth." The passage is condensed and subtle. But Maurice is contrasting the notion of God as the mere force behind nature and natural instinct with the idea of God as the Power who originates moral relationships, the Power whom we see reflected in "happy household love" among men. The true God is first revealed in the principle of family affection and loyalty, which is the root from which all human justice and fellowship develops. But if God is a God of moral relationships and not merely of physical

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force, if He reveals Himself through the family, as He did to Abraham, then He is really akin to us : He is no blind force, nor self-centred despot, but a God with a heart, recognizing moral ties with His people. There lies the root out of which Christianity springs. There, as Maurice says, is the beginning of the Church. For it is this conviction of God's moral relationship to us which unfolds at last into the Christian evangel of God's sacrificial love for us—that blazing truth which has astonished and fascinated Christian hearts from St. Paul's day to our own. God is our parent and our comrade. In all our affliction He is afflicted. He is martyred in our martyrdoms. In the sacrifice of the just for the unjust it is He Himself we see making atonement. His love uses its last weapon. He gives what costs a parent dearer than his own life—He gives the life of His child. We have no metaphor to go beyond that in describing the passion of God's heart. God is Abraham over again, but not giving His Son to death wilfully. Some theories of atonement would make out God to be as superstitious as Abraham before his enlightenment. But it is not at His desire that Christ dies. Like the owner of the vineyard He hoped against hope that men would reverence His Son. Only when they rejected Him did God submit, as it were, to the only way, the last chance of love's victory, and yield Christ to the Cross. God is not pleased with slaughter. It is not His will that the least of His little ones should perish. It is man in his reckless folly who imposes slaughter upon God, who drives God to yield His beloved Son to death, that at long last man may grow aghast at the havoc of his sin, and turn again and be forgiven.

God is related to us. His character is reflected in our own highest emotions and resolutions. And if there be men, as there are men, willing to yield to the uttermost sacrifice for the world's sake, willing to give up more than life itself—the fruit of their bodies, the incarnation of their

hopes—then we do but see in them a reflection of the true fact of God : that He is utterly given to the redemption of His world, ready to agonize in sacrifice for it. He gives His only Son. And when we watch Christ dying on the Cross, we look beyond Him to the heart of the Eternal Father, who suffers in that act an even deeper agony, even as a parent who should be condemned to witness his own son's martyrdom.

But why does the Almighty allow Himself to be put to so extreme a sacrifice for the world's sake ? Why does He not forcibly prevent man's ghastly sin ? Is not His sacrifice a sign of His impotence ? Why, if He be almighty, does he tolerate all the agelong martyrdom of the good at the hands of evil, which we Christians declare to be a martyrdom of His own heart ? Is not a baffled weakling on the throne of the universe, or else is not "the President of the Immortals" sporting with us all ? So, in the haste of our passionate pity, we query. But God is not almighty tyranny : He is all-soveran love. He cannot deny His own nature, nor subvert His own purpose. Love's way of conquest is the slow way of patient endurance, but it is the only way that succeeds in changing the heart of evil toward good. In our rash challenge to God to put His foot down with imperial dominance and stop the cruel crimes of men, we are asking Him to step on to a lower plane and to adopt an ineffective rôle. He is interfering in the only way that saves—the martyr's way. He conquers by forbearance. He does not dragoon His world : He dies for it, dies again and again in the death of His chosen children, dies in the Well-beloved. The meekness of the Almighty, who cannot be overcome because He is infinitely strong to bear and to endure—what a thought is there to humble our hot-headedness ! As if He were not infinitely more shocked and agonized by sin than we ! Yet we are tempted to think that our short-sighted remedies lie deeper than His, and to sneer at His somnolence or His powerlessness,

But no ! He is Christ. His method is Christ's method. He wins by suffering. He rises to victory by the Cross. He is the love that endureth all things and abideth. And there is no other power in heaven or earth to overcome evil but His sacrificial love.

O Father Eternal, whose love we have spurned, whose power we have doubted, teach us yet the gospel of Thy sacrifice ! Help us to understand that it is Thy heart we have broken in gibbeting the innocent ; that Thou hast been the victim of all our human crimes ; and that still in patient endurance Thou art bearing all we lay upon Thee, seeking Thy sweet revenge only in the changed heart which has wearied of its vileness and turns at last to bathe Thy feet in tears !

And to that prayer we add but this : As the ancient world sacrificed in dread of Thee, let us sacrifice in love of Thee ; may the knowledge of Thy gospel of love fortify us to share with Thee, in our poor way, the pain of the world's reclamation ; to be willing to give up all, as Thou wilt and when Thou wilt, following Thy path of sacrifice and holding back no dearest thing from Thy service, however bitter the cost, however dimly seen the gain ; until Thy blessed purpose be accomplished and a ransomed world rests marvelling in Thy peace.

VI

THE DREAM OF THE
HEAVENLY LADDER

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven : and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

GENESIS xxviii. 12.

VI

THE DREAM OF THE HEAVENLY LADDER

SOME years ago, while spending a holiday among the English Lakes, I was allowed one day to enter the grounds of Wordsworth's old home at Rydal Mount. In the midst of the garden, which slopes pretty steeply in front of the house, Wordsworth had built up a little hillock. From the garden level one has no very extensive view ; but as soon as you climb this little mound a magnificent panorama lies in front of you. Over the trees in the foreground you look down a great stretch of Windermere, three or four miles long ; and away to the south-west, capping the other hills, rises the great head of Bowfell. It is a very glorious prospect indeed.

One summer evening a century ago Wordsworth stood here watching a sunset of extraordinary splendour and beauty, and was inspired by it to write the last of his really great poems. For years afterwards he went on writing, but never again with any sustained magic in his pen. When the sun set so gloriously that evening, Wordsworth's poetry also gave out its last blaze of splendour and sank away into grey dusk.

Now he calls our attention, in a note to this poem, to a peculiar phenomenon sometimes observed in a mountainous district, when the air is very humid or filled with a sunny haze—an apparent multiplication of the mountain ridges one above the other, shadowy, ethereal, like a sort of Jacob's ladder leading up to heaven. It was so on the evening

in question; and these are the exquisite lines in which Wordsworth describes the scene :

No sound is uttered,—but a deep
 And solemn harmony pervades
 The hollow vale from steep to steep,
 And penetrates the glades.
 Far distant images draw nigh,
 Called forth by wondrous potency
 Of beamy radiance, that imbues,
 Whate'er it strikes, with gem-like hues!
 In vision exquisitely clear,
 Herds range along the mountain-side;
 And glistening antlers are descried;
 And gilded flocks appear.
 Thine is the tranquil hour, purpureal Eve!
 But long as god-like wish, or hope divine,
 Informs my spirit, ne'er can I believe
 That this magnificence is wholly thine!
 —From worlds not quickened by the sun
 A portion of the gift is won;
 An intermingling of Heaven's pomp is spread
 On ground which British shepherds tread!

And, if there be whom broken ties
 Afflict, or injuries assail,
 Yon hazy ridges to their eyes
 Present a glorious scale,
 Climbing suffused with sunny air,
 To stop—on record hath told where!
 And tempting Fancy to ascend,
 And with immortal spirits blend!
 —Wings at my shoulders seem to play;
 But, rooted here, I stand and gaze
 On those bright steps that heavenward raise
 Their practicable way.

Come forth, ye drooping old men, look abroad,
 And see to what fair countries ye are bound! . . .

Thus did Wordsworth look and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, whither the bright steps raised their practicable way.

Now let us look at another scene. It is night-time on the naked uplands of Palestine where “the Syrian stars

shine down." In a shallow dip among those rolling hills along which the northward road stretches is a lonely traveller. Lying about on the hill slopes, on either side of him, are flat slabs of limestone, with here and there rough pillars or cairns standing out. The hill-sides are all curiously ridged or terraced. This appearance is quite frequent in Palestine through the building up of artificial terraces for the growth of vines. But the limestone of the hills of Benjamin tends to form natural terraces, as it sometimes does, too, in our own country—on the flanks of Whernside, for example. Our traveller, overtaken by the fall of night, lies down on some flat bed of the limestone to sleep. There is a field of loose stone all around him, and, rising beyond it, that curiously ridged upward slope of the hills, which is the last image to fill his drowsy eyes as he falls into slumber. Then he dreams. And in his dream he still sees that strange hill-staircase; but it is no longer empty. It is populous with God's messengers, going up and down upon it, busy with divine ministries. And from its summit sounds the solemn thunder of a great voice speaking down to him. When at length he wakes, he is awed and fearful, yet comforted. Surely he has been lying at heaven's gate. And the voice of promise and reassurance he had heard while he slept was God's voice. By good luck he has lighted upon the very dwelling-place of God, and slept in sanctuary. And God has been very gracious to him. A lonely traveller going forth from home on a far quest of doubtful issue, he has been made aware of the Divine Guardianship of Him who makes the night winds His angels, and the light of moon and stars His ministers. As the dawn came up Jacob arose and took the stone he had lain upon to set it up as a holy cairn to mark the spot for perpetual memorial, consecrating it with oil and vows. To him, as to our English poet, bright steps had raised a practicable way from earth to heaven. And we may be sure he went upon his journey with a new sense of confidence

and good cheer. If in this barren and desolate spot he had so unexpectedly met with God, then surely God was not far from him at any time. He might at any moment come upon a Bethel, and find heaven's gate swing open, showing him infinite vistas of eternal life.

Ancient people instinctively seized upon such spots as had once yielded some manifestation of the Divine Presence, and regarded them as specially sacred, as likely to yield similar revelations again and again. A rock or a tree beside which some inspiration had once come to a man was regarded as a peculiar centre of divine communication. It has been so all over the world. And no doubt with justice, since association plays so great a part in preparing our minds for devout impressions. Rough cairns and monoliths seem to have been the first structures of worship everywhere, the first "houses of God." There were many *Beth-El* stones in Palestine, just as the sacred black stone at Meccah is still the great *Beit-Allah* of the Moslems. And in Greece at Delphi, anterior to any constructed temple, there were rude stones, anointed with oil by all the pilgrims who visited them, as Jacob's stone was anointed. And when we see our own British cromlechs we see similar sacred memorials of some far off moment when our ancestors experienced something which made them strangely aware of deity. All these rough pillars are the progenitors of our towering cathedrals and mosques and temples in the civilized world. And we, too, feel, not indeed that God is localized, but that God is often most easily reached in such places as have been consecrated by long periods of human worship. Such places gather an atmosphere about them from incessant habit of sacred use which draws the mind to contemplate God and makes it impressible and responsive to spiritual promptings. And so, though a man may find God anywhere, it is still good for us to have our places of sacred retreat, our definite altars, where the sense of God's presence is kept perpetually before us, where in a guarded stillness

the sacred light burns, or the sacred food is preserved, and every carven stone and panel gives sign of devout aspiration ; where, turning in from the noise and dust of the outer world, we grow quiet and murmur to ourselves, " How full of awe is this place ! This is none other than the House of God."

But the lesson of this old-world story is, probably, rather the reverse of this. It suggests, not that Jacob sought an already acknowledged shrine, but that the place became a shrine for the first time because of his vision there of the celestial ladder. He had found the divine presence in an expected and unpropitious place. The whole emphasis of the story is upon the grace of God in revealing Himself to such a man in such a spot. And it rather points the moral that no spot is too unpromising, no conditions too forlorn, for God to make Himself known within them to a prayerful heart. Francis Thompson caught this truth of the old story and expressed it in those last verses of his when he looked back in retrospect to his time of agony as a homeless wanderer in the London streets—a mere human derelict and outcast to all appearance, starved and half-clad, wretchedly seeking sleep among other huddled waifs on the seats of the Thames Embankment. But even there and then he could view the invisible and clutch the in-apprehensible :

The angels keep their ancient places ;—
Turn but a stone and start a wing !
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry ;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Charing Cross a temple ! A night on the Thames Embankment as place and hour of angelic communion ! It was the thrill of such a contrast that stirred Jacob on

the barren uplands of Benjamin and made the story of his dream so everlastingly memorable in the annals of religion.

And so it was that to a convict in the marble-quarries on Patmos came the shining vision of the Christ standing amid the seven churches on the mainland opposite, that lit up the pagan darkness around them like the seven-branched candlestick in the sanctuary at Jerusalem. So it was that to a prisoner in Bedford Gaol came vision of the Delectable Mountains. So to the outcast slave-girl Hagar, struggling across the desert with her dying child, came the voice of God's angel in succour. So David Livingstone in the heart of Africa, faced by a hostile and ominously threatening tribe, was "feeling much turmoil of spirit in view of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region knocked on the head by savages to-morrow. But Jesus came and said, 'All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth, and lo ! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.' " So again and again in the unlikelyst of places the ladder is set up from earth to heaven. Isaiah may see God and hear His summons amid the smoke of incense in the Holy of Holies, but Paul may see and hear Him on the open road as, rising over the shoulder of the hill, it gives for the first time a prospect of the white domes and minarets of a foreign city, sparkling there on the plain like a grain of salt. Our special altars exist but to teach us the universality of the sacramental Presence. In highways and byways, in desert and field and sea, at noon and at night, and to any man, sinner or saint, whose conscience is alive, the grace of God may come with succouring benediction ; and a dismal earth suddenly becomes the vestibule of heaven. Revelation is localized only by the sensitiveness of our own souls in particular places and moments. It is never God who is silent but we who are deaf. And often it will be precisely when our surroundings seem most barren and squalid, when our own resources are exhausted and our self-reliance fails, that our dumb cry of uttermost need is

dramatically answered, and we find God beside us uttering words of startling promise, and we see the ethereal stairs, the golden gates.

Maybe to most of us such moments of apocalypse are rare, if granted ever. But the religious life culminates in the open and perpetual vision of those who daily walk with God—not in the Old Testament revelation where God is seen once and again at an infrequent Bethel, but in the New Testament revelation where “hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” ; where, because we have seen God incarnate among us and His love is shed abroad in our hearts, we dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. Any locality will serve if the Son of Man be there. The inner spirit, not the outward situation, is the foundation where the heavenly ladder rests. When we reach our Sonship there is incessant commerce between the temporal and the eternal. No clouds and darkness screen the Father from us. No impassable gulf holds us out of reach of His hand. We dwell in God and He in us, and in our own spirits are erected the *scala Jacobi portaque eburnea*.

Her soul from earth to Heaven lies,
Like the ladder in the vision,
Whereon go
To and fro,
In ascension and demission,
Star-flecked feet of Paradise.

That is true of all the saints. Heaven and earth meet in them. They and their Father are at one. And so the symbolism of this splendid old Hebrew legend becomes an expression for the deepest experience and most sublime accomplishments of faith ; for the permanent mystical union of the human and the divine in the perfect Son of Man, in whom we see “the taking of our Manhood into God.” And the promise of our gospel is that our whole humanity may, through Him, be also taken up into God.

By adherence to Him we may be grafted upon Him, until His life is our life, and we no longer live but Christ lives in us. Then the Son of Manhood reappears, even in us prodigal and scapegrace children ; and upon us, too, the angels are seen ascendent and descendent : just as the young Stephen, transfigured by his baptism into Christ, could stand in the prisoner's dock with the vehement clamour of his enemies about him, and there see the heavens opened and the glory of God shining therein ; and his own face in its rapture looked as it had been the face of an angel. The dullest clay of our humanity may be irradiated and transfigured by the faith that discovers God's presence. The weakest and the meanest of us are called to be sons. We may grope for long enough in our ignorance and doubt, fumbling about the foot of " the great altar-stairs which slope through darkness up to God." But we shall find our footing at last and make our ascent.

Sir James Frazer, in his *Folk-lore in the Old Testament*, tells us how the ancient Egyptians used pathetically to put little miniature ladders in the graves of their dead with the idea of helping the souls to climb to heaven. And in ancient, and even in modern, Russia a similar custom is found—small ladders being buried with the corpse ; or little ladders of bread being baked at the funeral, in reminiscence of the previous custom, the original meaning of which is, perhaps, now forgotten. So indestructible is the hope of man that he is meant for a higher destiny than appears to our earth-bound vision. Through life and death we are called upward to God, who is our home. Primitive man feels this instinctively, and makes his pathetic provision for the ascent when this life is over. The Christian man rejoices in the open vision of God here and now. Now is the acceptable time. Here is eternal life—in the knowledge of the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent. There are, indeed, far heights of experience yet to be climbed. But for the Christian the steps are visible

and practicable. His foot is already on the ladder, and ministering hands are about him on all sides. His citizenship is even now in heaven. His intercourse with God is secure. In the Father's domain there are many camping-places ; but we know our destination and we know the route, and we know that God is with us all along the road. And so we pursue our pilgrimage with good cheer and hope and merriment. Out of the night of our doubts God has spoken to us, and we have seen His angels coming and going upon our loneliness ; and so with break of day we shoulder our baggage and tramp ahead with a gay courage

On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the City of God.

VII

WRESTLING WITH GOD

And Jacob was left alone ; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

GENESIS xxxii. 24.

VII

WRESTLING WITH GOD

THE story of Jacob's ladder shows us a man passively recipient of a divine inspiration which comes to him unexpectedly. Here is a complementary story in the life of Jacob which shows him winning a blessing from God by his own deliberate and even agonizing effort. And both stories are true as types of the soul's mystical experience. There are hours when the grace of God seems to rain upon a man, and he feels a lilting ecstasy more buoyant than the physical glee of youth. There are other hours when, despite all spiritual earnestness, the soul is dry and heavy; and desperate struggle alone avails to win the craved blessing. The lives of the saints will tell us how often they have to pass through the "Dark Night of the Soul" before they win Union and Light.

The original intent of the story here handed down to us is very obscure. People who are scholarly in these matters maintain various views. To some, for whom the patriarch is the symbol of a tribe rather than an historical individual, it may all suggest a struggle of the Jacob clan against some other clan with its protecting deity. Or others, for whom an individual man Jacob is the centre of the story, suggest that there was probably a sanctuary at Peniel where some god other than Yahweh was worshipped, and that Jacob, coming thither, managed by some force or magic to win a blessing from this deity, so that henceforth the Israelites had rights of worship there. And further, it is suggested that the curious episode of the halting upon the thigh refers

to some gesture in an old ritual dance at this particular sanctuary : the story of the wrestle being given as a supposed explanation of the origin of the dance. Many of the folk-dances taught to English children to-day include actions reminiscent of some ancient religious custom or other. On the other hand, such explanations may sometimes be plausibly invented to account for otherwise meaningless ritual ; and it is suggested that such is the case in this story of Jacob.

That it is very primitive in its religious standpoint is indicated by the way in which Jacob insists on knowing the name of his mysterious antagonist : it being a regular point of ancient magic to compel the utterance of an opponent's name. To know the name was equivalent to having power over the possessor of the name. Hence all sorts of curious dodges and subterfuges among savage folk to keep their true names secret. And again, there is the stress laid upon the necessary departure of the spirit before break of day. This is one of the commonest features in old folklore—as in the tales of the genii in the *Arabian Nights* and many old fairy-tales, or as with the witches and ghosts of Shakespeare.

However, the dim origins of this tale need not greatly concern us. As it appears in the Old Testament, whatever relics of earlier thought it may show, its meaning is clear and grand. The writer who inserted it here has read his own spiritual meanings into the ancient folk-tale handed down to him. It is no longer the spirit of a foreign sanctuary whom Jacob wrestles with, but the angel of Yahweh in human form—Jacob's true God who, for the moment, has taken flesh, and struggles with him in the ford of Jabbok. He is human in form ; but Jacob knows when the struggle is over that it is God Himself that he has wrestled with. He has seen God face to face, and yet he lives.

What a daring and tremendous conception it is, this wrestling of a poor lonely man with the very Godhead !

And how grateful we may feel to the quaint elements of the old primitive tradition which provided our Genesis writer with the hints on which he founded so moving and memorable a tale !

In the story as it is given to us Jacob is once again at a crisis in his career. Since that long past day when, flying from Esau's vengeance, he had been comforted with the angelic visitation at Bethel, Jacob had been living far away in the Hauran. He had married and got a family. He had acquired great wealth. And now he is venturing to return to his own country, quite uncertain how Esau will receive him. His conscience is uneasy. Will Esau forgive and forget ? Or will there be revenge waiting for him when he crosses the stream ? The morrow will decide ; for he has already sent messengers to Esau, and has heard of the latter's approach with four hundred men—a force that, to his timid conscience, suggests battle rather than reconciliation. Jacob's anxiety prompts him to two actions : he sends on ahead of him a great caravan of presents for Esau—droves of camels and cattle and sheep—in the hope of mollifying Esau's anger ; and he spends the night saying his prayers.

It is a really penitent man who is pictured to us—one doing his best to make amends for an old wrong, and to preserve his innocent family from any vengeance that his own fault might have warranted. And Jacob's is not an easy-going penitence. It may have arisen out of fear ; but there is a passionate moral alarm in it, and a great craving for spiritual succour. Such agony of mind demands solitude. And so Jacob sends his family and all his gear over-stream, that he may be alone with God. And in the black night on those moorlands east of Jordan, somewhere near the spot where the Jabbok brook flows into the main river, he finds himself with God, indeed, in a very soul-shaking way. So intense is his struggle for guidance and power and peace that to his imagination—or anyhow to the imagination

of those who heard some hint of his experience afterwards—it was as though he wrestled in sheer muscular tussle with flesh and blood. He sweated in prayer, in a strong agony of spiritual struggle—like Luther throwing the inkpot across his study at the devil, as if at an actual physical presence.

The anthropomorphism of this story is astonishingly frank and vivid ; but I think it is clear that the Genesis writer intends us to see in it an allegory of inward strife. He is spiritualizing an older and cruder form of the story, which still determines the shape of it ; but the soul of it is a new thing in his hands. He is reading in the life of the old patriarch a spiritual episode which foreshadows those awful night-watches in Gethsemane when the sweat fell from our Lord's brow as it were drops of blood.

And later ages have inevitably taken this weird and sombre tale as an allegory of the soul's struggle in prayer. Charles Wesley has so fixed it once and for all in his noble hymn, "Come, O Thou traveller unknown." And Francis Thompson in his essay entitled "Sanctity and Song" links up the Old Testament story with one of the Canticles attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, which figures the soul's prayer as a warfare with Christ in which the soul falls to the ground pierced by Christ's lance, only to be raised again by Him :

So keen and fresh that I
That moment could have scorned
To join the saints on high.

And thus revived, the soul returns to the conflict ; and, at last, "I conquered Christ my Lord."

Aye ! for so love teaches us, through its disciplines of pain and piercing, to win that hardihood of utter self-abandonment which makes God yield Himself to our importunity.

In the *Divine Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Sienna, the Voice of God declares : "I withdraw Myself from her

sentiment, depriving her of former consolations, in order to humiliate her, and cause her to seek Me in truth. Then, if she love Me without thought of self, and with lively faith and with hatred of her own sensuality, she rejoices in the time of trouble, deeming herself unworthy of peace and quietness of mind. . . . Though she perceives that I have withdrawn Myself, she does not on that account look back, but perseveres with humility in her exercises. . . . Once more do I leave her that she may see and know her defects, so that, feeling herself deprived of consolation and afflicted by pain, she may recognize her own weakness, and learn how incapable she is of stability or perseverance, thus cutting down to the very root of spiritual self-love : for this should be the end and purpose of all her self-knowledge, to rise above herself, digging up the root of self-love with the knife of self-hatred and the love of virtue." In such manner do the saints describe their struggle to hold on to a God who seems reluctant to bless them, who seems to withdraw Himself from them, only that they may the better learn their utter dependence upon Him ; that they may empty themselves the more completely of all self-content, however subtly spiritualized, in order to open their souls absolutely and make room for Him who is to be all in all. This struggle after an apparently withdrawing God is normal in the psychological development of the greater saints and mystics. And as John Tauler says of such : " According to their own ideas they are the farthest off from God, and yet they are the nearest. They imagine that of all they are the castaways, and yet they are the very elect."

Prayer is so shallow a thing with most of us that the language of the saints may seem like jargon from a strange planet. But true prayer is just as real and creative an energy in the realm of the spirit as the pursuit of any art or science is in the realm of the mind, or any athletic exercise in the realm of the body. It is the soul's gymnastic ; and a man's spiritual power and quality grow thereby, as his

muscles do by devotion to a special sport, or his brains by application to a special line of study. And the talk of the saints and mystics is but a discussion of the technique of prayer—meaningless or irksome to the outsider, as technical discussions always are, but full of instruction to those who make any serious effort at such exercise of the soul.

Where the language of the mystics may seem *outré*, and too far aloof from us, we may, however, submit to be guided by a famous novelist. Few writers have said more wise things about prayer than George Meredith. "It cleanses the nature," he says in a letter to a friend; "it rouses up and cleanses the nature, and searches us through to find what we are." To his boy he wrote: "Prayer for strength of soul is that passion of the soul which catches the gift it seeks." Or take this noble passage of old Dr. Shrapnell's in *Beauchamp's Career*: "Take this for the good in prayer, that it makes us repose on the unknown with confidence, makes us flexible to change, makes us ready for revolution—for life, then! He who has the fountain of prayer in him will not complain of hazards. Prayer is the recognition, of laws; the soul's exercise and source of strength; its thread of conjunction with them. . . . Cast forth the soul in prayer, you meet the effluence of the outer truth, you join with the creative elements giving breath to you; and that crust of habit which is the soul's tomb; and custom, the soul's tyrant; and pride, our volcano-peak that sinks us in a crater; and fear, which plucks the feathers from the wings of the soul and sits it naked and shivering in a vault, where the passing of a common hodman's foot above sounds like the king of terrors coming—you are free of them, you live in the day and for the future, by this exercise and discipline of the soul's faith." Meredith saw that prayer was a real energy, working changes in men; and he sums up the philosophy of it in his famous aphorism: "Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered." Most vitally true that word is, and crying out to be declared among

us. But the mystics will go on to teach us what terrific wrestling will be needed before any poor measure of betterment makes itself felt and seen ; what an infinite vista of change and growth prayer opens up ; and how arduous much of the way will be. It is a long journey from hell to heaven ; and yet the human soul can say of itself : " I myself am heaven and hell." And prayer is the long road by which a man ascends from one to the other.

However, the happy truth is that change is possible to us through prayer, albeit the discipline is sharp and long. Jacob wrestles through the live-long night, but in the morning he is a new man with a new name—no longer Jacob, the supplanter, the trickster, but Israel, God's warrior, trained in the lists by God Himself. He is a new man because he has clung on to God through the night of doubt and fear with all the strength of such poor faith as he possessed, and now, with the dawn, he sees God's face and discovers the ineffable Name.

We are all searching for that Name. In the sweat of intellectual effort after truth, the long patience of research till we grasp one more fragment of reality, one more fact that adds its ray of light to life's meaning—in all this men are struggling to name that which is hidden behind this pageant of hills and skies and seas ; of human beings living and dying ; of the rise and fall of nations ; of changing eras ; of the creation and extinction of the very stars.

And in all the work of human art, that struggle to perceive and establish beauty through manipulation of sound and form and colour ; and in all the labour of human love toward social amelioration—the relief of sickness, the reclamation of the wayward, the delivery of the oppressed—what are men doing but seeking to demonstrate the truth and power of a Name revealed to them as the veritable designation of God ? One might say with justice that the human advance in religion has come about step by step as men named God afresh—as they perceived a new

truth about Him. It was a gigantic step forward when the old Hebrews learnt to speak of God as "the Eternal who loveth righteousness." It was the crown of revelation when, through Jesus Christ, men learnt to name Him love. But even in this old tale of Jacob, the idea that God's true name, His essential character, is revealed as loving-kindness has its foreshadowing. For when Jacob meets with his brother later in the day, and is overwhelmed by Esau's magnanimity and good-will, he declares: "I have seen thy face, as one seeth the face of God, and thou wast pleased with me." Esau's magnanimity is the mirror of God. It is such a loving spirit as Esau incarnates that Jacob's prayer had taught him to recognize as God's Spirit. He had found that God forgave, that God was love; and the new faith made him a new man.

At bottom we all have to find out God's Name for ourselves. It is all very well for some one to tell us that God is love, but we need to feel this in our own experience if the faith is to become our very own, affecting us vitally. Those who seek to evangelize us must make us see the Face of God in their own faces, as Esau did to Jacob; they must demonstrate the divine power of love triumphing over evil. We cannot learn God's Name by hearsay; we must wrestle for it in our inward struggle after spiritual vision. But we may be blessedly confirmed in our conviction when we see the divine character shining forth in the humanity of our fellow-men. No doubt we may help each other somewhat by argument and instruction, making for a better-proportioned outlook upon life, a saner judgment of the facts. But we can really evangelize and convert only by demonstrating in our own lives the presence and power of that God we name as Love and Righteousness. Even then, however clearly this God be evidenced and illustrated, as He is in all fulness in Jesus Christ, the individual soul has still to grapple on to Him with intense, persistent effort, before God lodges in the soul itself, an abiding Guest,

and to doubt Him becomes as impossible as to doubt one's own existence. There can be no escape from the discipline of prayer as the foundation of enlightenment and conviction. Vital faith becomes ours only by the soul's *agonia*.

But for those who do honestly wrestle—facing, if need be, the dark night of the soul—light does come, for God is love, and it is His blessed will that all men should come to a knowledge of the truth which makes them free.

Wilt Thou not yet to me reveal
Thy new, unutterable Name ?
Tell me, I still beseech Thee, tell :
To know it now resolved I am :
Wrestling, I will not let Thee go,
Till I Thy Name, Thy Nature, know.

'Tis Love ! 'tis Love ! Thou diedst for me,
I hear Thy whisper in my heart !
The morning breaks, the shadows flee ;
Pure universal Love Thou art !
To me, to all, Thy mercies move ;
Thy Nature, and Thy Name, is Love !

My prayer hath power with God ; the grace
Unspeakable I now receive ;
Through faith I see Thee face to face,
I see Thee face to face, and live :
In vain I have not wept and strove ;
Thy Nature, and Thy Name, is Love.

And so the soul stands in morning light on Peniel, lamed with battle maybe, but at rest ; having wrested to itself the peace of God, which passes understanding because it is no fruit of the understanding, but of that intuitive insight of the soul which is developed by the energy of prayer. It has awakened to God, and is satisfied with His likeness.

VIII

THE BABE AFLOAT

And when the mother could no longer hide the child, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch and put the child therein ; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.

EXODUS ii. 3.

VIII

THE BABE AFLOAT

HERE is the old tale, known to us from infancy, about the birth of Moses: how he was laid in a basket on the Nile and discovered there by the Princess of Egypt, and taken to be reared in the King's palace. A delightful story, pretty and happy as a fairy-tale! And every mother who reads it must feel the mercy and the hope of it—this tiny, helpless life apparently cast into such peril, and then so graciously rescued by a royal condescension and led from poverty and obscurity to live amid king's courts, and to become the saviour of a people. The story is a type of the providential care which we would fain believe guards the lives of all little children sent forth into this perilous world. It expresses the anxious pity of the adult heart for babyhood, and its faith that He who creates is also He who will guard to the end.

This story is not the special property of the Jews; it is a legend that has been told all over the world in places widely separate. In Babylon, in Greece, in Rome, in Germany, and in Japan, and I dare say in many other regions, the same or some similar story has been handed down the ages: of how a child was launched out upon life's river alone and helpless, and how some merciful care stooped to protect it, and brought it at last to the palace of the king. Perhaps the oldest instance of it is the story found among the clay tablets of ancient Babylon, which runs like this: "Sargina, the powerful King, the King of Agade am I. My mother was poor, my father I knew not; the brother

of my father lived in the mountains. . . . My mother, who was poor, conceived me, and secretly gave birth to me ; she placed me in a basket of reeds, she shut up the mouth of it with bitumen, she abandoned me to the river, which did not overwhelm me. The river bore me away, and brought me to Akki the Irrigator. Akki the Irrigator" (a rain-god, presumably) "received me in the goodness of his heart. Akki the Irrigator reared me to boyhood. Akki the Irrigator made me a gardener. My service as a gardener was pleasing unto Istar, and I became King."

Similarly the Japanese legend tells how the first child of Iyanagi and Iyanami, the parents of gods and men, was set adrift in an ark of reeds. And the same sort of tale has crept into our own literature, as, for example, in the case of Shakespeare's *Perdita*. Again and again the heroes of the race have been pictured as born amid poverty and danger, and then wonderfully rescued and exalted to the highest places. These stories are all echoes of the voice of faith deep in the heart of man that God is He "who hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted them of low degree." And more than that : they are echoes from the voice of faith in every parent's heart that God the All-Father is not willing that the least of His little ones should perish, but that, having brought them to life, He will watch over them and hold them in His safe keeping whatsoever comes.

Surely this old tale of the Babe Afloat carries its message still to all anxious-hearted parents who have set the little frail crafts of their children's lives on the great stream of the world. Such fragile little things they are, and such a dangerous adventure they are beginning, that you almost wonder as you look at them whether you were wise to take the risk of launching them amid such treacherous currents. You feel that you would like to hold them by you for ever lest disaster should fall on them, as Sir Austin Feverel

“wished to be Providence to his son.” But alas ! you cannot. There they are, launched forth as little independent beings, each with his own life-voyage ahead of him, which he must travel alone. None, not even his mother, can go with him. She can only keep watch from far off to see what befalls, and interfere now and then to offer some help. The child is distinct and separate, a personality acting on its own will and fulfilling its own destiny. Its life-voyage is a new event, without strict precedent or parallel ; and with whatever care you build its ark, and cement it to keep the evil from leaking in, yet, once launched, the child is his own pilot, and you can but stand on the shores of his life and watch him sail away. The venture has appalling risk. Down-stream he floats on the tides of time, and he may land in heaven or he may land in hell. He may keep a straight course from the beginning, or he may sail upon rocks and quicksands and incur all manner of shocking catastrophes. His course is not within your determination. You use your utmost care to give him a fair start, and yet it is possible for his will to undo all your best provision and to contradict all your dearest purposes. It does happen at times that the children for whom anxious prayers have been offered and costly sacrifices made, nevertheless drift away into miserable and shameful places. That is a possibility. That is the great risk of birth.

But that is not the whole of the story of human life and love. It would be foolish to minimize the danger ; but it would be treason against God if we thought of the danger alone, and not also of the providence of His Spirit interweaving its rule amid the chances and changes of our life, and opening up the way of escape. No thoughtful and sensitive men and women would ever dare to bring children into this world unless they relied upon a fundamental belief that in spite of all, at the long last, through whatever evil misadventures, these children would win home to safety and joy ; unless they believed that there was

a Grace in the universe which stoops to help its children, as Pharaoh's daughter stooped to Moses, and will not leave them succourless.

It is precisely this trust that our religion establishes and our sacrament of baptism proclaims. We assert that the world is not the sport of chance, but the design of good-will ; that when God creates a child He will never lose hold of that child, but will pursue him through all his ignorant wanderings and wilful mischiefs, saving him at last, even though it be by fire. We assert that being God's child he is an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven, and not the kingdom of hell ; and that if he ever gets imprisoned in the latter, it still is his prison, not his home, and he cannot be satisfied to be there for ever—he will win his way out. We assert that, though a child should awhile be lost, in this world of Our Father's he will be found again. We assert that there is a great main current of love in the stream of life which sooner or later brings all men home. The backwoodsmen of America tie their logs in rafts and leave them to drift rudderless on the great rivers, because they know that, however slow the journey, the raft will come at last to its destination on the coast, since “ even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea.” And so generation after generation humanity launches out its children, believing that, although they go forth alone amid great perils, there is a current of divine love flowing through life which will carry them at last to the desired haven. That is the good, hopeful doctrine upon which our sacrament of baptism ultimately rests.

Father, father, where are you going ?
Oh do not walk so fast !
Speak, father, speak to your little boy,
Or else I shall be lost.

The night was dark, no father was there,
The child was wet with dew ;
The mire was deep, and the child did weep,
And away the vapour flew.

So sings William Blake, with his lovely simplicity, about *The Little Boy Lost*. But then he adds the companion poem on *The Little Boy Found* :

The little boy lost in the lonely fen,
Led by the wandering light,
Began to cry, but God, ever nigh,
Appeared like his father, in white.

He kissed the child, and by the hand led,
And to his mother brought,
Who in sorrow pale, through the lonely dale,
The little boy weeping sought.

In these verses, or in the kindred ones about the Little Girl Lost and Found, that dear magician, Blake, preaches the very essence of that Christian faith we hold in a grace that guards all life, into the care of which we commit our children.

Do you ask for proof of the truth of this happy creed ? Do you want evidence of the "love that rules the sun and all the stars" ? Jesus Christ bade men look for the evidence in their own hearts. A shepherd is restless and inconsolable until he has found a straysheep : *Even so*—that is our Lord's argument—even so must you judge the heart of the Eternal. Has the human creature invented a quality of which the Divine Creator is devoid ? Is the Unseen Source less noble than its issue ? Or is the word true : "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" ?

Read such a tale as Tennyson's *Mizpah*, and see human mother-love crooning over the scattered bones of a criminal hung from the gallows at some windy cross-roads. To one human heart the criminal is still a child to be cherished. Night after night the widowed mother climbs the hill to pick up any fresh fragment of his weather-bitten bones that may have fallen from the clanking cage. *There* is a love stronger than sin, stronger than death. *Whence came it* ? That comfortable person, Mrs. Winthrop, in George Eliot's story, gives the only sane answer, when she is discussing deep conundrums of theology with Silas Marner :

“ It allays comes into my head when I’m sorry for folks, and feel as I can’t do a power to help ’em, not if I was to get up i’ the middle o’ the night—it comes into my head as Them above has got a deal tenderer heart nor what I’ve got—for I can’t be anyways better nor Them as made me ; and if anything looks hard to me, it’s because there’s things I don’t know on ; and for the matter o’ that, there may be plenty o’ things I don’t know on, for it’s little as I know—that it is. And that’s all as ever I can be sure on, and everything else is a big puzzle to me when I think on it. And all as we’ve got to do is to trusten, Master Marner—to do the right thing as fur as we know, and to trusten. For if us as knows so little can see a bit o’ good and rights, we may be sure as there’s a good and a rights bigger nor what we can know—I feel it i’ my own inside as it must be so.” Mrs. Winthrop’s theology was soundly Christian. The evidence for our faith in love as ultimate in power, in love as God, lies in what we actually see of love’s operations in this world triumphing again and again over evil, and refusing to recognize defeat.

Now this faith in the rescuing grace of God is what we proclaim through our Christian sacrament of baptism. In baptizing our children we declare our faith in a love that lies deeper than man’s deepest hate ; and we seek to put them into the fellowship of those who are pledged to this faith, so that this divine love may be transmitted to them without hindrance. A fellowship of those who really believe that God is Love is an ark into which any child may be safely placed for his crossing of “ the waves of this troublesome world.” That is the point of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. That doctrine asserts that, despite the evil in which they are born, children are nevertheless God’s offspring, and will show themselves to be such if they are put into their right spiritual environment—that ark of Christian fellowship which is the vehicle of the regenerating Spirit. Get them placed there and you

need have no qualms about the peril of their birth, but only a glad thanksgiving. You may boldly make the hazardous experiment of replenishing the earth, for you are confident that, perilous and awful as the world is where our lonely wills can work such havoc, it is nevertheless our Father's home, where He rules, where His will must ultimately be done. And if a child is placed where the love of God is fully mediated to Him, His true nature will blossom out surely enough ; he will become a child of grace, and not a child of disgrace.

The Christian sacrament of baptism shouts out a great hope to men. It embodies a glorious optimism. It says very frankly that life is a perilous business ; that human nature, unless it is awakened to the love of God, is a dismal and perverse thing, full of all rottenness. You are, therefore, taking an overwhelming and unjustifiable risk in launching a child into the world unless you perceive that there are means, and make effort to secure the means, by which you can surround it by redeeming influences that will draw out its potential Divine Sonship. Those means exist. They exist in the Church—not, alas ! very evidently in anything and everything which calls itself a church, because so many churches may be but dead limbs in the Body of Christ. But they exist wherever the Church is approximately true to its own ideal. It may certainly be claimed that these redeeming influences exist wherever a faith in divine love is creating true fellowship among men, whether such fellowship calls itself a church or no, and whether it employs any rite of initiation or no. To surround a child with the atmosphere of godly love is the essential regenerative deed. But this is dramatized by the sacrament of baptism, in which we plant a child into the historic body of believers in a redeeming God—the Christian Ecclesia—regarded as the centre of operation of the regenerating agencies of God's love, the main conduit of the Holy Ghost. Here, in the Christian fellowship, despite all mis-

apprehensions, contortions and mystifications of the doctrine, and despite all laxity and apostasy of practice, the great faith has been taught and acted upon down the ages, that a Rescuer awaits the Babe Afloat who will bring him to dwell in king's chambers. Here, in the Christian fellowship—exactly in so far as it is really Christian, exactly in so far as the faith in a Divine Grace is really operative—is the theatre of all those influences of divine love mediated through men which provide the regenerating environment for the world's children. Here, in technical Christian parlance, is the chief sphere of the Holy Spirit. Here, therefore, is the Ark in which a child setting out upon his life's adventure needs to be placed. It does not provide a magic charm against disaster. It does not determine a child's destiny against, or apart from, his own free choices. But it provides the saving environment in which right choices have the scale weighted in their favour. No one would doubt the efficacy of baptism into the Church if the Church were thoroughly and unquestionably Christian. Men will very properly shrink from baptizing their children into a fanatical sect, or into a snobbish class-conscious group, or into a vague indeterminate mass that lacks distinguishing principles. And the visible churches look too often like one or other of these things. What claims to be the Body of Christ appears an unwholesome and paralytic organism. Instead of a seaworthy craft that men would scramble with alacrity to be aboard of for safety in the storm, they see a derelict with broken masts and uncaulked seams; and they distrust the promise of safety held out to them. But, if the ship leaks, it has not thrown its captain overboard. Despite all blunder and failure it is inside the Church that Christ is to be found. His presence has restored and re-invigorated it again and again. The deposit of His power is there, often rusting in disuse, yet waiting to be rediscovered, and always, when re-employed, showing its inexhaustible efficacy.

And so the old legend of the Babe in the Ark remains to picture a great truth of our gospel—a truth admittedly blurred by the Church's apostasy, yet still a truth. Our children need not be launched helpless upon their dangerous earthly adventure. They are born to be kings, royally free and wealthy in all noble equipments. And such they shall become, if we do our part in providing opportunity for God's good grace to operate upon them. We are increasingly careful of their bodily welfare in our modern societies. With our health-visitors and our school clinics and many other agencies we are endeavouring to secure for them an adequate physical opportunity in life. But their adequate spiritual opportunity is given only as we succeed in immersing them in Christ, in surrounding them with all the gracious and holy influences that derive from Him. If they find themselves in Him, they will understand their inheritance as sons of God, sharers in a heavenly kingdom. Earth, despite all its pains, will be recognized as a good gift for those who accept it with courage and loyalty. The peril of the great river of life is not purposeless, nor will these children find themselves the sport of a careless tyrant who leaves them undefended to drift into chaos. They are the creatures of Eternal Love. Succour is at hand for them always. Their destiny is a princely one.

But they will not and cannot believe all this unless a saving love really does surround them. Where the faith of the Church is absent men, reflecting on the helplessness of childhood, are reduced to the desperate sadness of such words as these of Thomas Hardy's, when, in describing in his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* the string of young children in the feckless John Durbeyfield's family, he says: "All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship—entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation,

disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them—six helpless creatures, who had never been asked if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield.” Later in the story, on the evening before the fatherless family is to be turned out of the old cottage home, Tess gathers the younger children about the fire, and they sing hymns they have learnt in Sunday school. The young voices move Tess to tears, and she turns away to the window to hide them. “If she could only believe what the children were singing; if she were only sure, how different all would now be; how confidently she would leave them to Providence and their future kingdom. But to Tess, as to not a few millions of others, there was ghastly satire in the poet’s lines—

Not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come.

To her and her like, birth itself was an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion, whose gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed to justify, and at best could only palliate.”

The aching sadness of such words as those is inevitable except where a faith in Divine Love comes effectively to baptize children into a saving and happy environment. Without this, birth does indeed seem hapless and unjustifiable. But our gospel is that, if it seems so, it is because we are failing to mediate God’s love to childhood. It is our fault, our own fault, our own most grievous fault. The Church exists to remedy such ghoulish circumstance which the devilry of human carelessness brings about; and to make it clear to all that there is a fellowship of love waiting to receive all children and work upon them regeneratively. In a really Christian society, if the parents fail, the children are not left succourless: they are members of a body which recognizes responsibility for them and does its best to bring

to bear upon them the rescuing grace of God. Hardy's grim words provide just the basis that is needed for a recognition of the utter necessity of baptizing children into a fellowship inspired by God's love, as the only tolerable condition upon which childhood should be allowed to enter the world at all. Such a fellowship is the only ark that can safely carry them through the waves of this perilous world. And that fellowship may and does exist wherever "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost."

The little Durbeyfields had no doubt been formally christened at the parish church. But they had received there only the sentiment of the hymns they learnt—enough to move wistful longings in Tess's heart, and in their own as they grew older, but no more. The Church had not been vital and effective enough to convert their parents, or substantially to succour the children themselves when left forlorn. But such failure of the Church in practice does not alter the ideal truth the Church is set to proclaim. We have still to declare, still to try ever harder to demonstrate, that there is no child so forlornly circumstanced but that the love of God, if brought into effective operation through the Church which professes to embody it, is adequate to redeem it from all things that harm and hate, and make it the inheritor of a glorious kingdom of joy and peace.

Like little Cinderella in her ragged clothes, who is clad gloriously by a fairy god-mother, so any child may be transfiguringly clothed upon by Christ, if the Church provides a true god-parentage for it. And then the love of the dear Prince claims the child's soul ! She may still fail in obedience, being human only—a little person of good intent, but not altogether wise as yet. But the Prince loves her, and pursues her, infallibly identifying her beneath all disguises of that old ragged self of hers—that childhood of disgrace, because he has in his keeping the unstained crystal slipper—her footprint in that transfigured hour when her real self as

a child of grace shone out delightfully. And so, for sure, he finds her again, and carries her back to the palace; and the curtain of the story falls upon the bridegroom with his bride. That happy fairy-tale is but another allegory of the redeeming love of Christ, who, calling His children to Him, strips off the old self and clothes them with the new self, and marries them to the Ideal, to the Well-Beloved Son.

Baby Moses in the bulrushes; Cinderella in the kitchen—these are types of the world's children destined to be rescued by the grace of God and translated into the Kingdom of Heaven.

IX

THE BURNING BUSH

And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush : and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

EXODUS iii. 2.

IX

THE BURNING BUSH

THE peninsula of Sinai, although in ancient times rather better wooded and possessing more grassy valleys than now, has always been a "great and terrible wilderness." Its huge granite peaks, rising to nine thousand feet, fall in shudderingly steep cliffs to the very beach of the Gulf of Akabah on the east ; on the west they leave a narrow plain between their base and the waters of the Gulf of Suez ; on the north this mountain triangle is bounded by a narrow stretch of desert sand, from which rises again the great limestone plateau called the desert of the Tih. Sinai is a turbulent confusion of dark red hills, streaked with dark green and purple—a tossed wilderness of wave-like rocks full of smouldering colour. It is a skeleton of a land, a land stripped to the bone. Some few valleys are still verdurous, but on the summits there is blank aridity, utter desolation. And the land is shrouded in deathly silence. No sound of falling water, no hum of insects, no whispering leaves break the appalling stillness. Voices can, in consequence, be heard at such incredible distances that it is a saying of the Arabs that one can be heard across the whole breadth of the Gulf of Akabah. The only music in this gigantic mountain waste is the mournful booming of the sand-drifts as they dislodge themselves on the slopes, giving rise to the legend of a subterranean convent sounding its bell for prayer—the loosened sand making a loud swelling din like a wetted finger drawn across glass, as Doughty

describes it in his *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, or like the lingering reverberations after the chime of a great bell.

There are many indications that far back in history there was more pasturage in the valleys and more bush on the hills than is now discoverable. The Arabs have cut down a large part of the scant growth of desert trees—the acacias, in particular, which afford a poor traffic in charcoal, as of old their very hard timber, shittim wood, was used for the furniture of the tabernacle and other buildings. It was a kindred bush, the senna, or *acacia nilotica*—a thorn that flowers with yellow blossoms—that probably gave the name “Sinai” to this district. It is a plant that will grow in granite grit where nothing else will grow. And it was this bush, perhaps, which Moses saw all aflame with God.

He had been brought up, according to tradition, at Pharaoh’s Court, in the heart of the great Egyptian civilization. All the luxury then possible to man had been at his disposal. It was the magnificent age of the great Ramesses II, who employed the Hebrews and many other foreigners in slave-labour on his great architectural designs, and “made their lives bitter in mortar and brick.” But Moses himself escaped the fate of his fellow-countrymen through his good luck in being adopted by the Princess. His youth was not burdened with toil, but quickened by the tuition of the best scholars, the society and converse of the imperial palace, the recreations of aristocratic ease. But he was a Hebrew still; and the fierce patriotism burnt in his soul which all down the ages has marked out that people and kept them an intact race through hundreds of years though scattered to every land on earth. One day he came across a slave-driver flogging a Hebrew. The sight made his blood boil with generous indignation, and, seeing no witnesses about, he pummelled the fellow to death and buried him in the sand. And no doubt he stalked back to the palace with his head full of Utopian plans for the deliverance of his brethren from their servitude—all

the heat of youth's generous passion and hopeful imagination burning in his breast. But like every other inexperienced reformer he had yet to learn the rottenness of the human material he was planning to help. The very next day he tries to appease a quarrel between two Hebrews. But instead of accepting his advice and leadership they turn on him with angry taunts, wanting to know whom he is going to kill next. His deed of yesterday was carelessly bruited abroad by the very people on whose behalf the rash and terrible, if unselfish, thing had been done. Very quickly it reached the ears of Pharaoh, and then Moses had to flee for his life. The only escape for him out of Egypt was eastward to Arabia, where at least he would be among Semitic peoples, distantly akin to his own. So he came to Sinai, and settled among a tribe of Midianites or Arabs at the head of the Gulf of Akabah, becoming at once servant and son-in-law to a great desert sheikh named Jethro.

It was a strange alteration of life to a city-bred man—like a Londoner being suddenly pitched on to a ranch in the American West. But Moses was a highly trained man. The later Jewish stories which tell of his prowess as an army leader in Ethiopia, or of his inventive genius as an engineer in Egypt, may be fanciful ; but he had been educated, it is said, at Heliopolis, the university of that old Egyptian world, and so had the trained understanding which could quickly pick up the very different lore of the desert tribes with their business of nomadic shepherding. But it meant rough and dangerous living. It meant catering for yourself, and depending on your own wits for safety and comfort. It meant learning all the tips that a good scout acquires—how to find food and water in the arid wilderness ; how to make a fire and cook ; how to read the weather signs ; how to select curative herbs in case of sickness ; and all the innumerable small bits of experimental knowledge that give ease to journeying and comfort to the camp at night. It meant developing sight and hearing

to an abnormal acuteness. And it meant fearlessness in solitude ; long days of lonely communion with the great powers of nature and their invisible Creator ; a sense of the awfulness of God ; a sense of destiny and providence.

It was these years of desert discipline which made Moses so intrepid and dexterous a leader of the great herd of city slaves whom he led out into the wilderness. They were instantly at a loss, terrified, helpless, ready to run back again into slavery. But this unrivalled scoutmaster, with prodigious energy and resource, will never be beaten. He not only finds them food and drink and pasturage, but organizes them into an army, establishes a common law and a tribal constitution, gives them a religion, and leaves them at last ready victoriously to enter the lost home of their forefathers—that hill-country beyond the northern horizon, which to the meagrely fed inhabitants of Arabia has always been, and still is, spoken of as “ the good land of the north, where is milk enough,” a land flowing, as old Israel said, with milk and honey.

This Moses, then, was soon the right-hand man of his father-in-law, Jethro. And “ as he kept the flock of Jethro, he led it to the back of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb.” And somewhere amid those barren and savage mountains the lonely shepherd, like Mohammed in his mountain cave near Mecca two thousand years later, had a vision which completely altered his career, and drew him out from his obscure solitude to be one of the half-dozen or so great founders of religion on this earth. “ The angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.” We have to guess at the meaning underlying such an abrupt and condensed narrative. Our worrying search after explanations could hardly have been understood by the ancient chroniclers to whom the mere mention of the name of God was adequate reason for any astonishing incident in a world so full of recurrent marvel as this. No novel prodigy could greatly

surprise men who lived with such a profound feeling of supernatural powers at work about them as the Arab or the Israelite. To seek to understand the mystery would be blasphemy, an insolent questioning of the Almighty. But our modern attitude compels questioning. We believe God wants us to find out the laws of His working in this world. He provokes our mental inquiry. Our passionate search for explanations, our eagerness to put mysterious incidents into some known category, and to trace effects back to known causes, are, we fully believe, due to that very spirit of God Himself in man, which is a spirit of knowledge, wisdom and understanding as well as of reverence and holy fear.

A bush that burnt and yet was not consumed : was it simply the senna bush in its season of yellow blossoming which suddenly struck the imagination of Moses as a holy and adorable thing, and made him fling off his sandals as if he were entering a sacred place? Just as Linnæus the botanist, wandering on Wimbledon Common when the gorse had broken out in all its golden splendour, dropped on his knees, as the story goes, to praise God for such a great glory. Or as Richard Wilson, the first of our English landscape painters, stood speechless before a waterfall in Italy, until at last he burst out in admiration, "Well done, waterfall, by God!" It is indeed by God that such superb scenes are wrought for us. And probably we have all had our ecstatic moments when we have felt the impulse to take off our hats to a sunset, or a bank of daffodils, or a west-country apple-orchard in May. This is the sentiment of Mrs. Browning's often quoted lines :

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God ;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

But this purely poetic explanation of the matter is probably quite inadequate to account for the momentous results of

this incident and the way in which it stands out in the narratives of after-times as a thing uniquely astonishing. There is, apparently, an actual bush known to botanists, the *dictamnus fraxinella*, which, through some peculiar property it possesses, can catch fire without any damage being done to its leaves ; but it does not belong to Arabia. Robertson Smith, in his *Religion of the Semites*, maintained that the explanation of the burning bush must lie in some electrical phenomenon occurring in the clear dry air of the desert or of lofty mountains. There is little doubt that electrical phenomena, from the frequent lightning flash in heaven to rarer and more bizarre appearances, must, in their utter inexplicableness in the ancient world, have stood out as among the most evident signs of the presence and power of mysterious Deity. We know how electrical fires will appear to play around a tree or some projecting object. And Robertson Smith quotes one or two parallels to this Mosaic story. It was believed, for instance, "that fire played about the branches of the sacred olive-tree between the Ambrosian rocks at Tyre without scorching its leaves." And the same phenomenon was seen at the terebinth at Mamre. While "at Aphaca, at the annual feast, the goddess appeared in the form of a fiery meteor, which descended from the mountain-top and plunged into the water, or, according to another account, fire played about the temple, presumably in the tree-tops of the sacred grove." There, then, in some electrical phenomenon akin to St. Elmo's fire and, possibly, to our will-o'-the-wisp, lies, in all probability, the explanation of the physical miracle which so profoundly impressed Moses. This amazing vision coming to him in the desolate solitude of Horeb startled him to a vivid sense of the Divine Presence. This thing was an angel of the Lord to him. As he drew near it he felt compelled as by an authoritative voice to treat the spot as a sanctuary, and, with the customary gesture of eastern reverence, he loosed his sandals and stole forward bare-

footed to see this wondrous sight, why the bush was not burnt.

The vision came to a heart prepared for a great call of duty. In his lonely meditative life in the wilds the thoughts of Moses must often have turned back to the dismal enslavement of his fellow-countrymen in Egypt. And now another Pharaoh sat upon the throne. It might be tolerably safe for Moses to return. Could he not do something to liberate his people? It was worth the risk of trying. Why should he be living in this freedom and quietness in Arabia while his fellows toiled under the ghastly lash of the task-masters, and crept broken and wearied to their squalid huts about Memphis at the end of the day? Such reflections must often have haunted him. And now that he was face to face with the presence of God in the bush, the sense of the divine summons could only take one form for him. This awful Godhead so mysteriously evidenced to him in his loneliness was surely claiming his service. This God who ruled the sunrise and the desert winds and all the magic of nature was He, too, who governed the destiny of men. And He was righteous. It was not His will that men should be enslaved to wrong. But He needed servants to carry out His purposes, even as He made use of the mountain-thorn to reveal His Presence. And then the Divine Voice rang out unmistakably in Moses's conscience: God had chosen him and was looking to him to act as the deliverer of Israel. That was the meaning of the holy fire that burnt miraculously in front of him. It was a trumpet-call to a tremendous task. Suddenly and quite clearly he realizes what must often have haunted him as a passing suggestion in his mind—that he is no longer to tarry in Midian. His people were losing their souls under that grinding tyranny yonder. Their sense for fatherland, their religion, were almost gone. They were so many beasts of burden, that was all—waking each morning to a sick monotony of agony and sweat. And here was he,

their natural leader, with all his advantages of education and Court influence, living free and safe amid the infinite quietude and austere beauty of the desert. The winds of these wide upland spaces, the infinite breadth of the heavens overhead, the purple splendour of the rocks and the intense blue of the far-off sea, were all preaching to him of duty. How dare he feed his soul on God's splendour while his poor compatriots were writhing under tyrannous toil? Was he a coward after all? There stood the thorn ablaze with magical light—God's angel. God was calling him. All the doubts and excuses which came crowding to his mind slunk off again ashamed. There was only one thing to be done. He must return to Egypt and deliver his people from their yoke. The fact of that wondrous bush and the fact of slavery were incompatible. God's glory in the bush was an awful protest against any human lives being forced into unloveliness and terror and woe. It must not be. His mission was laid upon him. He had seen God face to face in order that he might become the saviour of his people. Thenceforward he had a vocation.

O world, as God has made it! all is beauty:
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.

Behind the greatest human careers there must always lie some such moment of supreme consecration. It was so with Isaiah in the temple, with his vision of the six-winged seraphim chanting their Trisagion about the feet of God. It was so with Paul on the Damascus road. It was so, to quote a humbler case, with the young Wordsworth, when, after a night of dancing and merriment in a Cumberland village, he made his way home over the hills at dawn:

Magnificent
The morning rose, in memorable pomp,
Glorious as e'er I had beheld—in front,
The sea lay laughing at a distance; near,
The solid mountains shone, bright as the clouds,
Grain-tinctured, drenched in empyrean light;

And in the meadows and the lower grounds
 Was all the sweetness of a common dawn—
 Dews, vapours, and the melody of birds,
 And labourers going forth to till the fields.
 Ah! need I say, dear Friend! that to the brim
 My heart was full; I made no vows, but vows
 Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
 Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
 A dedicated Spirit.

These moments of impassioned insight come to all of us in our measure. Happy he who, looking back across the years, can say with Paul, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision."

The great lesson of the burning bush is that to see God means always to be challenged and thrust forward into service. Rightly to adore God's glory means that we will tolerate no defacement of His creation; that we will consider it worth while to fight to a finish in order to secure for every one a share in beauty and freedom. It means that we shall be revolutionists on behalf of justice. When we have been luxuriating in a delightful holiday season amid hills and waterfalls, amid orchards and scented hedgerows, has not the burden of the toiling multitudes in some city slum come back upon us, until we have felt that it was not fair for us to be there, unless out of all that enrichment we were winning for ourselves, we went back full of eagerness to lend a hand toward the liberation and upliftment of mankind? That was exactly the sentiment of Coleridge on leaving his cottage at Clevedon; and he has given a permanent expression to it in English poetry in his *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement*:

Ah! quiet dell! dear cot, and mount sublime!
 I was constrained to quit you. Was it right,
 While my unnumbered brethren toiled and bled,
 That I should dream away the entrusted hours
 On rose-leaf beds, pampering the coward heart
 With feelings all too delicate for use?
 Sweet is the tear that from some Howard's eye
 Drops on the cheek of one he lifts from earth:

And he that works me good with unmoved face
Does it but half: he chills me while he aids
My benefactor, not my brother man!
Yet even this, this cold beneficence
Praise, praise it, O my Soul! oft as thou scann'st
The sluggard Pity's vision-weaving tribe!
Who sigh for wretchedness, yet shun the wretched,
Nursing in some delicious solitude
Their slothful loves and dainty sympathies!
I therefore go, and join head, heart and hand,
Active and firm, to fight the bloodless fight
Of science, freedom and the truth in Christ.

All generous hearts will inwardly echo that nobly expressed resolve. We have no right to enjoy heaven while our fellows groan in hell. We have got rid indeed of chattel slavery from the world. Yet how accursedly cramped and impoverished, illiterate and enfeebled are the lives of the majority of mankind even now! Let those of us whose lives have been nurtured in comfort and loveliness; who can afford to furnish our homes richly, and dress our children sweetly, and go travelling amid the finest scenes that earth can show; let all of us to whom in any measure these great privileges belong think of the dull, penurious lives of those whose surroundings make even bare cleanliness possible only by the most extravagantly arduous toil; who never have nice things about them—no lovely ornaments, or choice books, or pleasant gardens, or delicately served meals—nothing but the long round of dull labour, with squalid rooms and underfeeding; who see their children coarsening before their very eyes through lack of leisured attention and guardianship; who have no little hoard laid by to tide them through a bad season or a spell of sickness; and to whom a cheerless funeral through the sordid streets comes all too soon, and yet as a welcome relief. That such lives should be lived by men and women in a world where the miracles of God's glory are so plentiful and so dazzling! God calls us to straighten out the sorry tangle. The whole universe protests against our ugliness and unhappiness.

Every tree with its miracles of rising sap and leaf and blossom ; every stone with its miracles of crystal ; every wave of the sea, and every glance of sunshine ; every human body in its glory of shape and mechanism—all shout to us to arrange our human relationships conformably to the wealth and dignity of God's world. It is an insult to the sunlight that such lives should be lived, an outrage in the face of the moon. Therefore to those who have power and health and culture the incessant call comes to rescue humanity out of the slavery of this Egyptian darkness. An Exodus is possible. God wills it. And He summons us, like Moses, to turn back to the servitude where our brethren are, that we may herald among them the dawn of the life of the age to come, and open up the passage to the Land of Promise.

X

A HIGHWAY THROUGH
THE SEA

He rebuked the Red Sea also, and it was dried up :
So He led them through the depths, as through the wilderness.
And He saved them from the hand of him that hated them,
And redeemed them from the hand of the enemy.
And the waters covered their enemies :
There was not one of them left.

PSALM cvi. 9-11.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which He dried up before us, until we were gone over : that all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty : that ye might fear the Lord your God for ever.

JOSHUA iv. 23, 24.

X

A HIGHWAY THROUGH THE SEA

WE English folk can look back to one or two great moments of national salvation. The one which has impressed itself on our memory most of all is, perhaps, the defeat of the Spanish Armada. A new life began for England from that moment. Our country stepped forward to world-leadership in adventurous exploration and colonial expansion, and in political liberty, and in literature. Our peculiar English gifts in poetry, adventure and statesmanship burst into flower under the impulse of that great deliverance. The memory of such an episode feeds the spirit of a nation perpetually.

Now the Jews could look back upon two most dramatic deliverances. Twice over the whole nation was enslaved to a foreign Power ; twice over the nation was delivered. But whereas the latter escape from Babylon was a relatively tame affair, due to the magnanimity of Cyrus rather than to the heroism of any national leader, the earlier escape from Egypt was brought about by a thrilling effort of national hardihood and perseverance, carried through against enormous odds and crowned with magnificent success. No wonder that the Exodus stood out in Jewish memory as the supreme incident in their history, the dominating example of God's providence toward Israel. And no wonder that the national imagination, brooding from age to age over this superb and prodigious story, should have worked every detail of it to a pitch of extravagant supernaturalism. This is the story of a proud people's rebirth from uttermost ignominious slavery into freedom, conquest and empire.

There is, perhaps, no other episode in history that can quite parallel this in dramatic excitement and startling contrast. No wonder it was told in terms of supernatural prodigy.

It was amazing, in the first place, that the heroic leader Moses should have been able, by any bold defiance or diplomatic dexterity, to overcome the obstinate despotism of the Pharaoh. The thing seemed incredible without divine aid. Doubtless there was divine aid. And the Jewish historians expressed their conviction of this divine aid in the story of the plagues.

It is, perhaps, worth while giving a moment's reflection to these strange legends of how the wrath of God was poured upon the haughty imperialism of Egypt.

There are usually reckoned to be ten plagues. But this enumeration arises out of the fact that there are three separate accounts interwoven in the Book of Exodus, which really overlap each other. The plague of flies in one account parallels the plague of lice in another ; the murrain of one account is the same as the plague of boils in another. So that a careful scrutiny reduces the ten plagues to eight or perhaps seven. And they are all of them plagues or disastrous happenings to which Egypt is recurrently liable, just as in England we are recurrently liable to floods and gales and various epidemic diseases.

The first is the turning of the Nile water into blood. The nucleus of fact in this story is well known to be the annual discoloration of the Nile during the summer months, when, owing to the amount of decaying vegetable matter brought down in solution, the river water turns to a dull red colour and smells badly. In some years this discoloration is much more pronounced than in others, and causes real hardship through the impurity of the water.

When the water recedes from its flood-levels, and leaves stagnant pools everywhere about, a veritable plague of frogs, which spawn in these pools, may very likely follow.

Indeed, there have been recorded *showers* of mingled mud and tadpoles, when a violent wind has swept the naked mud-banks. A modern instance of this very curious phenomenon was recorded in the newspapers as recently as the year 1915 in a Reuter telegram from Gibraltar, which declared that during a thunderstorm at that place in the month of May a cloud belched forth millions of tiny frogs which had, it was supposed, been sucked up from a lake twenty miles distant. The ground about Gibraltar was said to be positively swarming with them.

In similar circumstances sand-flies or lice abound on the drying mud-banks, and become a very troublesome pest. Locusts are rare in Egypt, but occasionally they do sweep over from the Arabian desert on an east wind with their well-known destructiveness. Hail, too, is of quite rare occurrence ; but when it does come it is in a very severe form, with stones heavy enough to be really dangerous.

The plague of darkness probably refers to a sandstorm. These storms, brought up by spring winds from the south-west, blacken the sky worse than a London fog ; it is impossible to get shelter from them ; the sand chokes eyes and ears and throat ; people may even perish through suffocation. They are indeed a darkness which may be felt. And they are usually reckoned to last about three days—the time allotted to the plague of darkness. Finally, such a sandstorm irritates the skin, and is frequently followed by a murrain among the beasts.

And thus in the record of the plagues of Egypt we have reference to all the chief evils which afflict that land, and which to a large extent produce each other in a regular sequence of cause and effect. It is just as if a writer were to put down in succession all the possible misfortunes of a twelvemonth in England as being God's reiterated scourge to discipline us : heavy snows in December, with the loss of sheep on the moors—which snows, melting under a warmer wind, bring floods, and give us a whole nation

with a cold in the head ; then follow spring hurricanes, with wrecks upon the coast, old trees uprooted, buildings blown down ; and later, in the summer, comes drought and a spread of cholera ; and finally the crash of thunderstorms. So one upon another fall the plagues of Egypt. It was not impossible for them all to follow each other within a period of a few months, as the story of Exodus indicates. And a specially unfortunate year such as that would be would no doubt make even Pharaoh a little thoughtful, a little timid in his conscience, and inclined to listen the more readily to any suggestion as to a new course of conduct which might be expected to avert these evident signs of the wrath of heaven.

The only one of the plagues which is really puzzling is the destruction of the first-born. One may suppose that it refers to the universal mourning brought about by one or other of the civil wars which are known to have taken place in Egypt about this period, though such an explanation hardly gives the key to why it is that the story singles out only the eldest son in each family as being the victim of the angel of death. But any fuller explanation seems to be lacking.

These uncanny stories of the Egyptian plagues are all seen, then, to rest upon quite natural phenomena, though they are written up into an elaborately supernaturalistic shape. What it all amounts to is that Moses was astute enough to make use of a run of exceptionally bad luck which came to Egypt during the time of his agitation on behalf of the Hebrew slaves : he uses it to work on Pharaoh's fears. It was Pharaoh's tyranny, he would urge, which was bearing this evil fruit and bringing God's curse on the land. And at last the old tyrant is really moved by superstitious dread, and in desperation decides to let Moses have his way.

And so the ever memorable journey begins. A huge caravan of ignorant, timid, helpless folk, with wives and

children and chattels, struggles out by night towards the frontier. By the time they reach the line of the Suez Canal they hear that Pharaoh has repented of his weakness and is after them with his warriors to intercept their flight. What a scene of consternation for Moses to face ! They are just at the head of the Red Sea, between it and the salt lakes which fill a large part of the isthmus. The ground is all low-lying and marshy ; and apparently in ancient times, when the sea extended considerably farther north than it does now, an exceptionally high tide would flood through the marshes and join the waters of the ocean with the waters of the Bitter Lakes. At low tide there would be a wide stretch of shore at the north end of the Red Sea which might give firm enough travelling. Beside this shore the Israelites were encamped when the news of the pursuit reached them. Here they were penned in like Horatius on the broken bridge—the broad flood one way and a great host of enemies the other. It was useless for these poor slaves to put up a fight against the troops of Pharaoh. Their only hope was to get round the sea to the wilderness beyond. Would the tide ebb in time for them to get across ? One can imagine how anxiously they waited.

Then the ebb begins. As they watch it impatience and anxiety increase. At last the order is given to advance over the still wet sands, and the great frightened mob bundles itself across in frantic haste. It was a distance, maybe, of several miles ; the journey would take them some hours ; and before they reached the farther side the tide already would be turning. Meanwhile the Egyptian army, with its heavy lumbering chariots, essayed the same crossing. But it was poor going for all their heavy gear. They stick in the wet mud and precious time is wasted. And when the dawn comes up, and the Israelites look back from safety on the farther shore, Pharaoh and his army are struggling to disentangle themselves from the jeopardy of the rising tide. It is too late. They are right in the midst of the crossing ; it

is no easier to turn back than to go forward ; numbers of them are bogged and drowned, and the whole terrifying pursuit is shattered.

So came the great deliverance. So God made for Israel a highway through the sea. No doubt the triumphant escape owed much to the quick-witted strategy of Moses ; but the Israelites could not fail to ascribe the hand of God to it. It was His Providence which had set them free.

Anyone who knows the ebb and flow in an estuary such as the Solway or the sands of Dee, will understand the truth of this tale. It is so easy in such places to be overtaken by the tide which runs up with imperceptible swiftness. In the channel between Holy Island and the Northumberland coast, which is dry enough to walk across at low tide, it has been found necessary to erect shelters on tall scaffoldings for unwary travellers to escape into if the inflow should overtake them far from shore—experience having taught folk how easily such an accident may happen.

In the earliest documents of Exodus the natural character of this incident is clearly indicated. We are told that a strong east wind blew back the sea and caused a specially low tide. But the later Priestly Narrative talks of a path through the sea itself with a stupendous wall of water on either hand. So does legend grow in the pious imaginations of men. It is interesting to know that the story in the earlier documents is, so far, confirmed by a modern witness, Major-General Tulloch, who has recorded an instance which he himself observed, when, under a strong east wind, the waters of Lake Menzaleh at the entrance to the Suez Canal receded for a distance of seven miles. And there are other historical parallels to this passage of the Red Sea, such as the story reproduced in Hasting's *Bible Dictionary* of the Russian army which entered the Crimea in 1738 by a passage made for them by the wind through the shallow waters of the Putrid Sea—the north-western gulf

of the Sea of Azov. Most famous among such parallel stories, however, is that of the passage of Alexander along the coast of Lycia where the mountains descend almost sheer into the sea. A narrow roadway here was passable at certain tides, but with a south wind blowing the road was covered with a great depth of water. As Alexander approached the spot, the wind had been blowing strongly from the south, but, by the special providence of the gods as he declared, in the nick of time the wind changed to north, and the sea receded sufficiently for his troops to make headway, although they had the water up to their waists.

Finally, we may note the reproduction of the idea of a miraculous crossing of water in Jewish history itself, in the case of Joshua leading the tribes over Jordan ; and in that of Elijah crossing the same river dryshod after striking the waters with his mantle, just as the Priestly Narrative had represented the stretched-out arm of Moses as the instrument by which the Red Sea had been made to open a path to Israel. But in these instances there probably lies behind the story nothing but the choice of a natural ford ; though there is evidence of the waters of Jordan having been temporarily held up by landslides more than once, and it has been suggested as possible that Joshua may have taken advantage of such an occurrence, which would, indeed, make the passage of Jordan peculiarly memorable, and to the ancient mind as clearly an evidence of supernatural aid as the crossing of the Red Sea itself.

There is a memorable incident in the life of Santa Teresa. when, as an old woman of sixty-seven and half paralysed, she came on her journeying, with a group of her nuns, to a flooded river. The pontoon bridge was half a yard deep under water ; but that did not hinder Teresa. "Now then, my daughters," she said, "hinder me not ; for it is my desire to cross first, and, if I am drowned, I beseech you earnestly not to attempt it, but to return home." So saying, the valiant old woman plunged into the swirling

water and won through to the opposite bank, her whole party following her safely. It would have taken but little writing up of such an incident to turn it into sheer miracle ; for the basis of miracle is there—the marvellous power of a courage inspired by faith to overcome apparently insuperable obstacles. And such a story, repeating on a small scale the prowess of Moses at the Red Sea, helps us to understand where the miracle of the Exodus really lay—not in a physical but in a spiritual prodigy.

This astonishing Crossing of the Sea stood out, then, in the memory of Israel as an unforgettable portent. It was the crisis of their deliverance. At one stroke they were free. Egypt was a nightmare from which they had suddenly awaked. Adventure and liberty lay ahead of them. Between their past and their future was a great gulf fixed. Never could they tire of celebrating that supreme moment when God had made for them a highway through the waters. It is the constant theme of their poets in after time. “God,” they sing exultantly, “did divide the sea by His strength, and broke the heads of the dragons in the waters ; He made the waters to stand as an heap. With the blast of His nostrils the waters were gathered together, and the depths were congealed in the heart of the sea.” And thus a very strong faith grew up in Israel that God’s providence could always lead them through their difficulties, that in every hour of disaster He would provide a way of escape. Their God was the God of the Exodus—their Deliverer.

We need that conviction of God as the great Liberator. And the Old Testament stories which symbolize such faith are therefore precious to us still, albeit our ideas as to the modes of God’s emancipating action may not be identical with the notions of old Hebrew theology. The note of deliverance rings out in the *Magnificat* as triumphantly as in the *Song of Miriam*. God is that power which exalts the enslaved and the oppressed. The Old Testament knew

that power to be the Spirit of Righteousness. There lay the moral superiority of the Hebrew conception of deity over any other in the ancient world. Yahweh was the God of Righteousness, the Spirit who appealed to a man through his conscience. He was the true God, and there was none other worshipful beside Him. The Divine Power manifested in the operations of nature, in the corn-field and the vineyard and the sea, may indeed be worshipful in degree, as the religion of ancient Greece endeavoured to show. But the concepts of God thus arrived at do not reach fundamental truth. They are not redeeming, emancipating concepts, as Greek philosophy itself soon found. It is God known as a moral power, the Spirit of Righteousness, who alone can deliver mankind from evil oppression. The Old Testament belief in God had, therefore, essential and permanent truth in it. Yahweh is often represented immorally as judged by our modern standards; but, in spite of this, the distinctive quality of the religion of Israel was that it saw God as, fundamentally, the power which uttered itself in man's conscience. And that was an unshakeable foundation for faith. The New Testament did but glorify this old concept of God's righteousness by showing that righteousness, in the last resort, spells love. The Spirit of holy love incarnate in Christ—there is the final revelation of the true God, the only saviour and emancipator of mankind. It was this God, this Holy Spirit working through Moses, who verily delivered Israel out of Egypt. It is this God who has brought about every mighty deliverance of nations and individuals from enslavement, whether to the tyranny of others or to the bondage of their own sin. It is He who through Mazzini delivered Italy into nationhood. It is He who through Lincoln emancipated the American negroes. It is He before whom all tyrannous Czardoms totter to destruction. For "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek." This God of Righteousness

and Love who alone is our Redeemer—ah ! if only the nations really believed in Him !

But we do not effectively believe in Him. After all the discipline of the ages we are still ready to believe in almost anything rather than good-will as the instrument of our safety and freedom and happiness. We still half believe that it is our own lusts or our own coercive self-assertion that will secure these things for us. And so we linger in the Egyptian darkness of political misrule, of social arrogance, and of individual malice—and the Promised Land remains far off across a gulf we shall never bridge until the true God guides us. Yet God's offer of liberty holds good for ever. The liberty of personal forgiveness, of absolution from a bad past, is received by those who answer the call of this true God : the fact of redemption is as obvious as the fact of sin. And the liberty of social fellowship is likewise received by those nations who answer the call of this true God : the fact of social redemption through obedience to God's law of justice is as obvious as that of social ruin by the indulgence of injustice. There is for individuals and for nations one infallible way of escape, and one only. There is one God alone, by worshipping whom we can be set free. He is the God of Moses and Isaiah, whose Name is Righteousness ; the God of Paul and of Francis, whose Name is Love. And thou shalt have no other gods before Him.

Israel was constantly saved by hope, because, in its far past, it had won from experience a rooted conviction that there was a Divine Power which could provide a way of escape from circumstances of uttermost despair. This conviction rallied the hearts of Israel's prophets again and again in periods of disaster. There was no evil which a loyal trust in the good God could not ultimately overcome. It is not an easy belief. Men are often otherwise persuaded. We are all tempted to fall into a faithless and cynical attitude which declares that evil is

bound to triumph, that the good is too difficult to accomplish ; that dreams of universal justice are Utopian ; that you cannot do much to alter things for the better ; that poverty and misery and vice and war are inherent in this world's life and can never be banished from it. And the supreme value of the Bible is that it gives a counterblast to all this cowardly cynicism, and preaches to us a Way of Escape by the hand of a God of Deliverance. Sin abounds on earth appallingly—all manner of oppressive wrong harasses and tortures human life. But there is a grace which much more abounds, shining out from every heroic and saintly exploit ever wrought on earth—the power of a Holy Spirit in man's heart, a spirit of integrity, courage and love which is victoriously valiant against evil, and which for ever will be sovran over every wrong if we follow its guidance obediently. With God all things are possible. You may imprison and crucify the Christ, but death cannot hold Him : after three days He shall rise again. You may maim and lacerate a whole people till their material resources are clean gone, but so long as a spark of faith is left among them you cannot quench the Holy Spirit in their midst, and they will revive and find their place on God's earth still. You may tempt the human soul and drag it down into a hell of woe and shame, but you can never so disfigure it that it loses its heavenly imprint and becomes finally unsalvable. The ultimate victory in this universe lies with the God who is righteousness and love. He is the God of our escape, of our salvation. Love never faileth

For those who really believe in and worship this saving God there is always a highway through the sea of trouble. And it is the folk possessed of such faith who all down the ages have lifted mankind out of its chains and led it toward the Land of Promise. They have been such as Browning sings of, who "never doubted clouds would break, never dreamed tho' right were worsted, wrong would triumph ;

held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake." Under their heroic leadership our timorous, distrustful, fainting humanity is still led onward, saved by the hope that we shall yet see the goodness of God in the land of the living.

XI

THE PILLAR OF
CLOUD AND FIRE

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way ; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light ; to go by day and by night : He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

EXODUS xiii. 21, 22.

And the angel of God which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them ; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them : and it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, so that the one came not near the other all the night.

EXODUS xiv. 19, 20

XI

THE PILLAR OF CLOUD AND FIRE

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, in writing to a circle of Greek readers about Moses as a military leader, tries to persuade them as to the truth of various features in the narrative of the Exodus by pointing out parallels from their own Greek history. He reminds them of how, when one of their generals, Thrasybulus, was on a certain occasion bringing back a body of exiles from Phylæ, and was wishing to elude observation, he marched through a trackless region in which a pillar became his guide. "To Thrasybulus by night, the sky being moonless and stormy, a fire appeared leading the way, which, having conducted them safely, left them near Munychia. From such an instance, therefore, let our accounts become creditable to the Greeks, namely that it was possible for the omnipotent God to make the pillar of fire, which was their guide on the march, go before the Hebrews by night." So we find this early Christian exponent of Scripture pointing out that the story of the pillar of cloud and fire in Exodus does not stand alone, but has parallels in classical history. What is the explanation of such legends? Almost certainly it is as follows:

It is a habit with Arabian and Persian caravans when crossing a wilderness to carry at the head of the march braziers of burning wood raised on poles. These serve as a guide to the direction of the march for the people in the rear of the caravan who otherwise, particularly at night, might lose touch with the folk ahead of them and miss their

way. For there is no road to guide them : they are crossing a trackless wilderness ; the caravan may straggle over a very long distance, and accidents may easily delay some parties until they are out of sight and hearing of the rest. Thus Doughty, in his *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, describes the beginning of a caravan march : “ The night sky was dark and showery when we removed, and cressets of iron cages set upon poles were borne to light the way, upon serving men’s shoulders, in all the companies.”

When Alexander penetrated into Babylonia in the course of his eastern campaigns, he adopted the same practice for his army. Many miles might separate the rearguard from the vanguard, but always away on the horizon of the desert there could be seen the towering column of smoke from their braziers—a smoke which at night burnt lurid and flame-like, as does the smoke of a railway train. This gave the needed signal of direction to the whole army.

Smoke columns have been used for military signalling in warfare right up to the present day. And they have another possible use also. Just as in the Battle of Jutland one read of how the German destroyers got between their damaged battleships and the English ships, and belched out a cloud of black smoke in order to screen the German retreat ; or just as our own Navy made use of a similar dodge in the attack upon Zeebrugge, so in the desert in old times the braziers would on occasion be brought from the van to the rear, and, with the help of a suitable wind, would send up a screen of smoke between the army and any hostile pursuers, under shelter of which the course of the march might be deflected, or preparations made for a defensive stand. Thus the pillar of cloud was both a guide and a defence to any body of travellers through the waste. The custom of carrying these braziers is still met with by modern travellers in Palestine and the neighbouring countries. So the fact underlying the legend in Exodus is hardly to be doubted.

But the Israelites saw God in the cloud. That is where the distinction of the story lies. There was nothing unnatural or prodigious about the fiery pillar : it was a thing in common use among the eastern nations. But the Israelites, with their peculiar spiritual sensitiveness, had wonder enough to see God in it. In all that helped and protected them they perceived His invisible hand. Every blessing was to them a holy miracle of God's special providence. It was He who beset them behind and before. It was He whose presence dwelt in the sacred chest in the little tabernacle which was the rallying point for their caravan, and around which the great braziers were placed at every halt. When they saw the smoke-cloud they felt secure : they were protected by it, and all protection comes from the good God. Did He not *dwell* in the cloud, then?

The marvel of the story does not lie in the material fact but in the spiritual handling of it. The writers of our Book of Exodus, telling this story some hundreds of years later, may not themselves have understood the nucleus of fact underlying it. In its passage down the generations it had crystallized into miracle, and probably no natural explanation was sought for or dreamt of. This does but emphasize the strong sense of the supernatural common in the ancient world. The Greek mind was just as ready as the Hebrew to interpret any striking fact as evidence of a supernatural providence. For example, when Timoleon set out upon his famous expedition to the relief of Syracuse, he caused one special trireme, says Grote, to be fitted out in honour of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, that they might accompany him. And lo ! when the squadron struck out on a night voyage to the Italian coast, this sacred trireme was seen to be illuminated by a blaze of light from heaven ; while a burning torch on high ran along with the ship and guided the pilot to the proper landing-place. This was taken as a clear token of the presence of the goddesses ; though one supposes it was not unusual for the

admiral's flagship to bear some special and striking light which would certainly "run along with the ship."

And such supernatural interpretations of fact have religious truth in them even for our sophisticated minds. We may be perfectly sure of the normality of the facts in a way in which the ancient Israelite or Greek, who recorded such stories, was not. And yet we may value that spiritual estimate of facts which made him turn the commonplace into the miraculous. For to wise men the commonplace is miraculous. To Peter Bell the primrose by the river's brim is just a yellow primrose and nothing more. To the poet it is an embodiment of the eternal beauty, a messenger of glad tidings, a symbol of God ; it is a miracle created by divine alchemy out of mere earth and air, a lasting source of astonishment and awe. It is the spiritual intuition of man which sees miracle in everyday fact, or more startlingly in abnormal fact. Once the miraculous interpretation has been established, the fact itself is apt to be transmuted into an impossible shape. But we can be grateful for the impossible shape it takes if thereby, albeit clumsily, man's sense of astonishment at things, of a divine presence in things, "something far more deeply interfused" in them than a flippant or unwondering glance can see, is preserved and quickened.

And this is an outstanding merit in these Old Testament tales. Everything is regarded with eyes of holy wonder. Every striking incident of the long journeyings in the wilderness is taken to be an exhibition, one way or another, of the power of God. And so the story of the Forty Years has become a symbol of the life-pilgrimage of every man ; not because it was in itself more marvellous than many redeeming passages in the history of other nations, but because of the reverent wonder that brooded over its every detail, and heightened every effect therein by a penetrating vision of the providence of God.

We of later generations, as we make our pilgrimage

across the wilderness of ignorance and sorrow, ever pursuing the dream of the promised country of happiness, and ever lured onward by faint glimpses of its borderland, look back to this ancient march of Israel, with its marvellous equipment of providential care, as a type of our own experience; and we take encouragement from it to face our own dangers. The hand that led them is still present to guide us also into a fair land flowing with milk and honey. Now and again, when the clouds lift, we seem to see on the horizon the Delectable Mountains, and we know that we shall arrive. Men write their rapturous expectations of that country of desire in their Utopias and Apocalypses. "There everlasting spring abides and never-withering flowers." But as yet we toil across the desert, often hungry and weary of heart, often in peril of battle and peril of storm; and we should falter were it not that we felt God's strong defence about us in the pillar of cloud and fire. In youth the pleasant country seems so near and easy to attain. We marvel indignantly that our predecessors have not quickened the pace and won their way home. We rush into the van shouting lustily to everybody to hurry up. And then as we struggle and toil to hasten the millenium we gradually feel the dead pull of the world's inertia. It is so slow to move. Its steps wander so purposelessly. Heroes and prophets and martyrs suffer and labour for the race, but men still tarry in their foolish idolatries, worshipping their golden calves, selling their souls to mammon, until it sometimes seems as if mankind never could reach its true home. And then God in His grace sends some ray of light—a little child dancing, an act of splendid kindness, a word that flashes like the words of Jesus—and in that ray we catch a glimpse of the distant hills again, our souls' home; and we know that our present world is not our true world, but only a place of passage. This world of wars and bickerings and falsehoods and lusts, of pain and hunger and loneliness—this is not what man is ultimately destined to. He belongs other

where. "In my Father's house are many mansions : I go to prepare a place for you." We are meant to reach a country where love reigns, and joy and peace—where no one any longer experiences bewilderment and languor and unsatisfied longing, but where all work is pleasure and all life is praise, and God has wiped away all tears from men's eyes.

Ah ! my sweet home Jerusalem
Would God I were in thee !

O happy harbour of the saints !
O sweet and pleasant soil !
In thee no sorrow may be found,
No grief, no care, no toil.

There lust and lucre cannot dwell,
There envy bears no sway ;
There is no hunger, heat, nor cold,
But pleasure every way.

Thy gardens and thy gallant walks
Continually are green,
There grow such sweet and pleasant flowers
As nowhere else are seen.

Thy walls are made of precious stones,
Thy bulwarks diamonds square,
Thy gates are of right orient pearl,
Exceeding rich and rare.

Thy houses are of ivory,
Thy windows crystal clear,
Thy tiles are made of beaten gold—
O God, that I were there !

So our longings shape themselves into lovely and solacing visions of the things to come, while we struggle forward, often disillusioned and often discouraged, but still saved by hope, for we believe that there is a wise Providence guiding all things to an issue in which we shall rest satisfied.

And meanwhile there is the recognized pillar of the Divine Presence about us—that ineffable sense of protection

and contentment which is the unfailing fruit of vital faith. Thus protected, martyrs have sung their way to the stake, and the leaders of many a seemingly lost cause have carried on unflinchingly, "still nursing the unconquerable hope"; while humble people in the midst of tiresome and monotonous duties have been able to talk in the strain of Brother Lawrence: "The time of business," said he, "does not differ with me from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were on my knees at the blessed sacrament." Or, as Santa Teresa put it: "God walks even amongst the pots and pipkins." Vexations and weariness and perils are all passed through by such folk, as Jesus passed through the crowd that would have flung him over the cliff at Nazareth. Nothing daunts them, or disturbs their equanimity. "The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand." "Because thou hast made the Lord, the Most High, thy *habitation*, there shall no evil befall thee." "In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust: be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort." God's presence is like a sheltering tent that surrounds these people as they move, and makes them immune from trouble. God's Spirit within them is their perpetual defence, as Godiva's chastity and pity were her screen and clothing the while she rode naked through the streets of Coventry. Innocence and uprightness are an unassailable armour in the midst of a dirty world; and such qualities are the evidence of the Divine Presence in man. The pillar of cloud and fire is within our own souls.

Yet not wholly so. Often it is some external aid which suggests the Presence—some symbol of fellowship, some social institution, some union in discipline. These things hedge our weak wills about, and give us succour and safety. And in our Exodus story it is this aspect of God's presence

which is emphasized—His presence as focused in the symbols of Israel's unity, in the cressets of fire which held the wandering caravan together and gave it a rallying point. It was a sacramental presence, not one of individualistic inspiration. Israel found God in the emblems of communal life—in the national flag, so to speak ; for the pillar of cloud served as their standard. As Englishmen abroad in a time of danger will seek safety in some shelter where the Union Jack flies, so these Israelites felt safety in rallying to the fiery pillar. But it was the safety, not of mere patriotism but of churchmanship—not the safety of political power and prestige throwing its mantle over them, but the safety of a common religious faith which bound them to mutual defence and service.

And if we are to draw out the true analogy in our own experience we must find our fiery pillar of the Divine Presence in the symbols of our Christian Churchmanship. It is the mystic fellowship of faith which is our guardian through life's wilderness, and it is the Church's sacraments which are the banner of our advance toward the far-off land of promise. It is in and through His Church that God safeguards us. What other safeguarding can there be in the arid and dangerous wilderness of our human sin and ignorance save the fellowship of a faith in the "love that rules the sun and all the stars"? Nothing can succour us but the comradeship which grows out of faith in God's holiness and love. But that does succour us absolutely. In the comradeship of this faith the pilgrim band goes forward through the darkness, and the guiding light gleams clear before them. Without the conviction of God's love there is nothing but a land of speculation ahead, and a land of strife and misery here and now. With it there is present safety and a steady approach to a land of *promise*. For the whole and sole promise of any attainable blessedness for humanity lies in the fact that God really is love. If that is not true, then all hope of beatitude is a childish

make-believe, an ineffectual and perishing dream ; and all pictures of the Kingdom of Heaven are, indeed, mere news from nowhere. In a universe where the qualities of the Eternal Being were not holiness and love, it is conceivable that men might make for themselves pathetic little temporary oases of good-will in the desert of blind fate or mocking hate that surrounded them ; but the abiding city of our heart's desire could never be reached. Nor could men, in their heroic effort to reach blessedness, feel that God was with them, and so reach the peace and contentment in their pilgrimage which the sense of His Presence brings. If God is not love, and if His blessed will is not surrounding us, the only sensible course is universal suicide. Unfaith reduces life to an absurdity. But men simply cannot acquiesce in the notion of a nonsensical universe. They may stumble among doubts, but it is only the faith in God as an eternal will of holiness that really answers their questionings and satisfies their longings. The Church which maintains this faith is their ultimate refuge. Only in its fellowship will the true conviction of God and the vital sense of His presence be established for all men. Our fiery pillar in life's wilderness is the lighted altar of the Christian Church—the symbol and rallying point of a comradeship of faith in a God of utter loving-kindness who is with His people in their afflictions, almighty to save. There the Angel of His Presence succours us. There His people, “like cattle that go down into the valley,” are caused by His Spirit to rest in utter quietness. And so, leading His people, does He make Himself a glorious Name.

Finding Him at this altar of our fellowship, and experiencing the safety and sweetness of His indwelling, we can have no fear in the present and no doubt for the future. In His Name we put our trust. He is a Good Shepherd who leads us, whether by pleasant meads or by perilous gorges, to a feast of delight at the day's end. And because

of our realization of His surrounding providence, we have no grievous sense of exile even among the frets and dangers of our pilgrimage. It is God's Home that we dwell in all the days of our life, and His goodness and mercy prevent and follow us.

XII

THE CORN OF HEAVEN

He opened the doors of heaven, and rained down manna upon them
to eat,

And gave them of the corn of heaven. Man did eat angel's food.

PSALM lxxviii. 23-25.

XII

THE CORN OF HEAVEN

It is very nice to think
The world is full of meat and drink,
With little children saying grace
In every Christian kind of place.

STEVENSON had a pretty vision of a rich and thankful world. But the trouble with a well-fed world is that its meals are so regular and so adequate that they cease to be regarded with any surprise. Wonder and gratitude are not aroused. A world where the streets are lined with restaurants, and where men eat four hearty meals a day, is a world where the practice of saying grace before meat dies out. Eating and drinking lose their ceremoniousness, and the mystery of food is forgotten. In more impoverished conditions, where food is scarce and precarious, the paramount blessing of it is forced upon every one's consciousness, and the daily meal tends to become a festal ceremony, a proper occasion for thanksgiving. Men rejoice over their food and marvel at it. What a miracle it is, this sustenance and re-creation of life : bread and wine and milk turning into muscular machinery and nervous energy and bone and flesh, just as the elements of earth and air are transmuted into green leaves and coloured flower-petals !

Picture a group of men spending a long winter in a snow-cave in the Antarctic, with nothing but seal-meat and biscuit to feed upon. What an incomparable treasure each day's meagre ration becomes ! What a chorus of thanksgiving at every little fresh discovery that varies their diet or improves its cooking—the first triumphant realization

of the value of seal-blubber, or the flavouring of seal's brain mixed with the stew ; or the making of lemonade out of acid taken from the medicine chest. In such adventurous circumstance almost the whole energy of life is concentrated on the problem of food, and every fresh bit of ingenuity in regard to it is as a God-given revelation commanding irrepressible applause.

Well ! something of this mental outlook on the problem of food was Israel's, as the people left Egyptian civilization behind them and plunged forward into the barren deserts of the Sinaitic peninsula. At first it seemed as if they were doomed to starve as soon as their own flocks and herds were consumed, and they very soon turned upon their leader and upbraided him for bringing them to die in the wilderness : "Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, and when we did eat bread to the full ; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger." And then, we are told, said the Lord unto Moses : "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you." And, indeed, Israel began to discover there in the desert altogether unexpected and inexplicable supplies of food that came like bread from heaven. Whenever the pinch of hunger and thirst was felt, some way was found to relieve it : water is struck from the very rock and bread falls down like dew. Hence to their amazement the Israelites found themselves alive month after month—alive and nourished in the midst of this parched wilderness ; and the poets of later times, when recounting the precious incidents of the Great Deliverance, were moved to declare how men ate angel's food, how God provided His people with corn of heaven.

The manna, at which the Israelites were so greatly astonished, is, as is well known to-day, a gum-like substance which exudes from several species of desert shrubs and trees and falls in flakes on the ground. A kind of manna

is still collected by the Arabs and sold to pilgrims. It is sometimes called oak-honey. But the usual manna grown in Mediterranean countries and sold in present-day markets comes from a species of ash. Manna is said to occur only in small quantities, and only during certain months of the year, and could never have formed the staple food of a whole tribe as it is represented as doing in the Book of Exodus. The manna obtainable in the Sinai region is a sugary substance got from the tamarisk trees. It exudes from the branches when these are punctured by certain insects. It is not cooked, but is eaten with bread, like honey. A similar substance is got from the eucalyptus in Australia, and is there eaten as a sweetmeat by the children.

The elaborate account of the way in which the manna was collected by the Israelites is therefore a romantic exaggeration of the actual facts. But it all grew out of the traditional wonder aroused by the discovery of this hitherto unknown and seemingly prodigious sort of food which came so providentially to replenish their meagre diet. Moses, who had lived for many years in this Sinaitic region working as a shepherd, knew all the desert lore and was doubtless the man who first put the people on to this new food supply. It was he, too, who, as a shepherd needing water for his flocks, had learnt to read the signs of the presence of water in places that seemed to the rest of the people utterly arid. Some sign of vegetation would show to his practised eye that there was moisture under the surface, and he would bid them dig, and lo ! there lay the hidden spring. But his knowledge seemed to these poor city slaves from Egypt something altogether supernatural. It may very well have happened that in his intercourse with the Bedawin shepherds he had picked up some trick such as the water-diviners of to-day use. They take, we are told, a fresh ash sapling ; cut from it a prong like the frame of a catapult ; and, holding the two points, walk over the ground until they are standing above hidden water, when the stem of the prong turns

downwards by some curious magnetic attraction, and thus the presence of water is revealed. This method, which is still used at times for the discovery of springs, may very well have been known to the ancients. Doughty tells us that some of the Arabian tribes "in all else ignorant wretches, have inherited a land lore from sire to son, of the least finding-places of water." However, be the method what it might, Moses was regarded as a thorough enchanter and wizard by reason of the way in which he discovered water at opportune moments ; and the way, too, in which he knew how to purify bitter water by throwing certain herbs into it. The people marvelled at their leader's uncanny acuteness. As the historians were wont to say, he had but to strike a rock with his staff, so to speak, and out gushed the water from it. Indeed, amid their grumbling ignorance, this old mountain shepherd, Moses, stands out as a man of immense resourcefulness and indomitable energy—one of the real great ones of this earth. It needed an extraordinary captaincy to conduct this great herd of slave-folk, utterly unused to nomadic conditions, year after year, through this inhospitable district of Sinai, and keep them all fed. Yet Moses accomplished the task. By his resource and courage through the "forty years" in the wilderness Israel fed upon "the corn of heaven."

What a lovely phrase that is ! All the poetry of food in four words ! Merely to say it over to oneself is like saying a grace. It arouses one to admiration at the perpetual miracle of food. It is like a Japanese poem—a single flash of insight expressed with the utmost verbal economy. The thing is said ; and a vision of all the farm-lands and orchards and food-shops on earth rises before one as proof of man's utter dependence on God's bounty. We see all our bread as heaven's gift.

It is, indeed, heaven's gift. Yet our enjoyment of it depends upon our human energy. Our Heavenly Father does not pamper His children. Still the ancient principle

abides : " In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread." For it is only God's Spirit in man co-operating with God's power in nature that brings increase of life and wealth and comfort. When we pray that God may give us our daily bread we are not to make our request as mere inactive recipients of a divine bounty—as mere lotos-eaters lying idle while the fruits of earth fall into our mouths. The gift is conditional upon our co-operation with God, just as the gift of forgiveness is conditional upon our readiness to forgive others—that is, upon a disposition toward humility and self-examination.

Now, there are two fundamental requisites in human society which condition the bounty of heaven toward us all : the first is work, the second is justice. Food can never be plenteous in a world of idlers ; it can never be evenly distributed in a world of gamblers. The earth never fails us : when there is famine in Israel there is corn in Egypt. The earth yields enough. Its supplies are inexhaustible. But only by God's energy in man, an energy of work and of brotherhood, can man be fed on this teeming earth. God answers our prayers through ourselves. God saves us through each other. When we pray to Him for food we are asking that a spirit of earnest industry and firm justice may be universally aroused in us to solve all the problems of hunger and nakedness and every bodily need of mankind. Our good-will in toil, our patient acquisition of new science, and our generous advance in comradeship, are the means of the fulfilment of our prayer. And these things are the working of God in us. An uninspired society, as a simple matter of fact, does not get its daily bread. Man, selfish and unregenerate, may look after his own needs ; though he will not do even this adequately, but only wastefully and short-sightedly. But he will certainly not look after the needs of others. It is only as man is moved by the Holy Spirit that he will make the common good his objective, that he will be anything

else than a scrambling, wasteful, selfish beast. And so long as he is this, large sections of society will be half-starved whatever riches are available; nor will the available riches be faintly approximate to the potential wealth of the earth. God's Spirit in man is demonstrably the only ultimate source of bodily welfare and the mastery of nature. It is precisely because we are so certain that all food is God's gift to us, the corn of heaven, that the Church makes a request for bread an integral part of its prayers—understanding that it is by prayer that the Divine Spirit enters into men, and that the Divine Spirit alone can successfully fight against hunger and destitution, and build up a society safeguarded in true wealth and health, with “joy in widest commonalty spread.” We do not pray for supernatural meals. But we know that all our meals are ultimately won for us by spiritual forces, won from God and by God. Israel was fed by God-given manna, but only through the instrumentality of the knowledge and resourcefulness of Moses, also God-given things. And all our food, however ordinary and unsurprising, is God-given in precisely similar ways, through the perennial marvel of earth's fruitfulness and the still greater marvel of the spiritual endowments of mankind, slowly increasing as the ages pass, spreading more and more from outstanding individuals into the general social inheritance of wisdom and good-will.

A few years ago, in one of our journals, there was an article written with admirable eloquence under the title “The Ravens that Feed England,” which brings very vividly to one's imagination the human labour upon which our food supplies depend. I will quote its central passage: “Famine cannot strike us; we are insulated from the physical disasters of the globe; we read of blights and droughts in this country or that, famine and pestilence that bring millions to starvation; but nothing ever happens to us. When the crops that supply us fail in one part of

the world, what we need is always somehow obtained in another. We believe in our hearts that, whoever else goes short, England's belly will be full; the ravens will feed us. The ravens do feed us—prompt, obedient ravens, hurrying hither and thither on our business over all the world; smoky, black-plumed ravens of the high seas, converging upon us day and night, and perching on the rocky rim of our island; sooty ravens of the land, that come flapping and screeching through the darkness, bringing food from the shore to our very doors. The ocean tramps and the goods trains are the humble ministers to all the poetry and romance of our island life. The sorrowful, rusty tramp nosing her way through the surges, sliding in between the pier-head lights of harbours and gliding out again in the grey, rainy dawns, blistered by tropical suns, sheeted with winter ice, and always coming home again to England, burrowing along towards the Lizard or the North Foreland or the South Stack or St. Abb's Head; and the goods train, more unlovely still—sooty, clanking chains that go dragging through the land day and night; halted for an hour at a time by some wayside signal-box to let the lordly pleasure-trains go by; broken up, marshalled, re-formed, banged about in switching yards, and bearing, nevertheless, the very elements and essence of our existence—there they are, and every one takes them for granted. They flutter their black wings through the night; our table is spread in the morning; the ravens have fed us."

There is the open secret of the miracle of the corn of heaven. The co-operative energy and wisdom of mankind, the holy spirit of service toiling to reap the earth's bounty and to distribute its gifts throughout the commonwealth—these are the instruments through which God's purpose is worked out. Nature offers her goods at a price. She is inexhaustible, but very chancy. She demands incessant effort, endless dexterity of contrivance. She fails us here

and there, in this way and in that, just so that we shall not stagnate and let our powers fall into disuse. She conditions her gifts so that we are kept ever on the alert, ever prompted toward mental and moral growth. This world is Jack's Bean-stalk. A brave race is given the opportunity to climb and wrest from the giant his golden eggs and his harp and his money-bags—that is to say, man, by arduous effort, can take command of sun and wind and rain, and make them serve his own purposes. He uses bottled sunshine to warm himself in winter ; he makes the sun take pictures for him, run errands for him, and heal his diseases. The wind is his servant to grind his corn, and drive his ships, and lift his aeroplanes. And he cages the rain in his reservoirs, and guides it through his aqueducts till wild flood and storm are tamed into bathroom attendants. But only after toilsome ascent and cunning wrestle of wit can the giant's treasures be thus exploited. And Jack is made a man by the strife.

But Jack always has a widowed mother to look after, and to share his wealth with. Whether or no she gets an adequate support depends not only on Jack's industry and resourcefulness, but on his sympathy, dutifulness and love. And so with society in general. We have learnt to our cost in bitter times of war and war's aftermath that wherever good-will fails in society, wherever selfishness, fear and hate poison and paralyse human relationships, it will follow, as night follows day, that great masses of mankind will suffer the agonies of nakedness and hunger. The corn of heaven is cornered. The devil in man obstructs God's will.

It is instructive to recall that, according to the old story in Exodus, Moses commanded his people to divide up the manna equitably—a like quantity for every man. The food was rationed out in daily allowances. But some greedy souls wanted to pile up a secret store. And the immediate result was that the manna rotted and bred worms. So long

as the rule of the commonwealth was obeyed all went well, and every man was wholesomely fed. So soon as greed and trickery crept in, the rot spread, and God's miracle of food was turned to loathsomeness. The story may not be very accurate history, but it is very sound morality. For indubitably we do benefit by God's succour contingently upon our obedience to His law. Our sins against brotherhood rot and ruin the very means whereby we live. Because men gamble for private gain, it will come about that immense stores of food are left rotting at the quay-sides; whole harvests are held up; ship-loads of fish are thrown back into the sea, while men elsewhere are starving. The profiteer hangs on to his goods to catch a rising price, and they come stale and infected into the market. Or it may even pay him to destroy half his produce so as to keep up an exaggerated price for the remainder. All such devil's tricks have their terrible results in injury to society. We cannot flout God's laws with impunity. And His law is that mankind shall reap the fruits of the earth only by the twin principles of labour and justice, by unselfish effort in production and distribution. When those two principles guide society the corn of heaven is ours, and all are rich in common wealth. When either of those principles is disregarded, society remains impoverished, underbred and inefficient—a half-baked scone, as Hosea said of Ephraim, overdone in wasteful luxury at one end and underdone in pitiful destitution at the other.

Hence our abiding need for that simple and fundamental prayer for daily bread, the prayer of that Church which is the holy fellowship of the faithful, through which God's will gets ministered to mankind. Only where God's Spirit is really incarnated can the hungry be fed and the poor enriched. But when His Spirit is present this blessed effect is assured and inevitable. For our God never fails us. "Happy is he," sang the old psalmist, "that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord

his God : which executeth justice for the oppressed, which giveth food to the hungry." It is literally and irreversibly true. He and He alone "satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness." He always, and He alone, "hath filled the hungry with good things." No other power does this but God working in the hearts and minds of men. And the only way to open up our human nature to His entry, till we embody Him more and more fully, is by prayer : the spiritual effort to bring our wills—so short-sighted and perverse and errant—into captivity to His will which is utterly wise and good, and under the guidance of which we may all share a life that is life indeed.

We have hardly glimpsed as yet the rare wealth that will be ours one day when God is really known and fully honoured over all the earth. "Then the parched land shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water." Our present civilization will seem a starved and squalid sort of life when men look back upon it from those splendid eras of the future. Yet they will see how all along, from the dim beginnings of history, God was leading humanity toward a serene prosperity. Exactly in the measure that they understood Him and obeyed Him was true wealth guaranteed to them. And in marvellous moments, amid the drear deserts of earthly discipline, when some heroic God-intoxicated leader stood out for awhile as a witness and a commander to common men, the doors of heaven were opened, and man, in utter astonishment, did eat angel's food.

XIII

THE WALLS OF JERICHO

Now Jericho was straitly shut up because of the children of Israel : none went out, and none came in. And the Lord said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho. And ye shall compass the city, all ye men of war, and the priests shall blow with the trumpets. And it shall come to pass that the wall of the city shall fall down flat, and the people shall ascend up every man straight before him.

JOSHUA vi. 1-5.

XIII

THE WALLS OF JERICHO

THE increasing hatred of war in modern Christendom leads many earnest folk into too hasty a deprecation of the fierce battle-tales in our earlier Scripture records. We have at last grown sensitive to the accusation that Europe, while bearing the Christian name, has all along been striking a compromise between Christ and Odin. And in our modern eagerness to attain a pacific ethic we are a little unduly scared at any effort to trace God's hand in the wild warrings of old Israel. There are folk who would rejoice to see the Old Testament scrapped.

Well ! we cannot, indeed, regard these old tales with the same complacency that was characteristic equally of our Puritan forefathers and of their Roman opponents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Among them there seems to have been an almost gloating relish for the memory of how the Chosen People slaughtered their heathen foes. Their God was a man of war, scattering his enemies by hard thwacks. It seemed an easy way to get rid of evil, and the Old Testament gave such convenient precedents. So Europe of the Reformation and the counter-Reformation very strenuously followed Joshua as a short cut to following Jesus.

Even to-day there still linger in the intellectual purlieus of society views of Biblical inspiration on the level of the Moslem worship of the Quran, which make men persuade themselves into believing that everything Israel did under the assumed command of God must have been entirely

right and a model for all ages. To such readers the inspiration of the deed is the guarantee of its rightness, and not vice versa. Very astonishing feats are performed in the apologetic exegesis which this standpoint necessitates. But the average modern conscience cannot boast of the requisite agility for such performances, and they are gone sadly out of fashion.

To-day we may still believe that Israel was a people of God's choice ; but we see that all peoples are in their different ways and degrees called and chosen for specific achievements in this world—as, indeed, the Old Testament at its best itself teaches us : “ Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel ? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt ? *And the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir ?* ” And while we recognize that Israel was, indeed, a divine instrument in history, we see that the methods employed for its advancement were nevertheless not always such as a developing ethical insight can approve. But if such considerations lead us contemptuously to throw aside the battle stories of Israel as morally worthless to the modern Christian world, we are letting an indiscriminate impatience deprive us of many a stirring lesson, and denuding ancient history of the imperishable values that it really possesses. Heaven avert the day when our English history books will be carefully expurgated of all reference to Agincourt and the Armada ! And heaven preserve us from the emasculated Bible which the timid morality of some moderns would reduce us to !

The reaction from an earlier exaggerated glorification of Israel as an unique people before whom all others were but as dirt to be trampled under foot, with all the attempted justification of Israel's most barbaric deeds which such a view made plausible, has resulted in a prevalent view of Israel as a mere marauding clan, breaking into its neighbours' lands without semblance of right, and inspired by a

religion differing merely in nomenclature from those of the various peoples who surrounded it. Each point of view is equally distant from the truth. Israel, with all its moral limitations and failures, was yet inspired by truths about God which lifted its life distinctly above the level of contemporary civilizations. And in its fierce battles for the Promised Land it was after all fighting for its old home. If it had made conquest of an entirely new country it would have been doing what all expanding nations have done through all time. But Israel had as good right in Palestine as anyone else. Territory cannot have been very clearly defined among these primitive, and often nomadic, tribes. But if any land was homeland to Israel it was assuredly the country where Abraham had settled and bought the ground for his sepulchre. Besides, it is not certain that the whole nation of Israel was captive in Egypt: some clans may, it is thought, have remained all along in Palestine, and if so, Israel's right there was all the stronger.

However, these questions are of little import. The fact remains that Israel had to win its way into Palestine with the sword. And it shared such notions of military ethic as were current in the ancient world. Joshua's wars were wars of extermination, very bloody and horrible to contemplate. But such ruthlessness was not abnormal. And it is no good bringing forward our modern squeamishness to judge the ancients. They are not our models. Their methods would outrage and horrify us if advocated to-day—although we can use a good deal of frightfulness ourselves without turning a hair, and have our polite, but still deadly, ways of making war on women and children. But we have to take civilization as we find it at different periods of the world's history, and see what elements of nobility shine out from men's deeds amid such and such a moral environment. We shall not turn to Joshua to learn tenderness. But he was a man strict to his own standard of

uprightness and with a quick faith in God as he understood Him. And what a bonny fighter he was ! His strategy at Ai and his smashing assault down the pass of Beth-horon stand out with real notableness in the annals of war.

But the incident in his career which is stamped most firmly in memory is, from the startling manner in which it is recorded, that of the fall of Jericho.

The death of Moses had left Israel on the plateau of Moab looking with hungry eyes across Jordan to the old homeland of their desire. But the entry thereto looked to be full of formidable difficulty. The crossing of the Jordan was itself a serious problem ; and directly opposite such crossing lay the strong-looking city of Jericho backed by precipitous hills and ringed in with running brooks. There, it seemed, lay the key to Palestine. Having once secured Jericho, with its great fruiting woodlands of date-palm and its inexhaustible waters, the people would have a rich and plentiful base from which at leisure to spread over the central uplands.

How the crossing of the impetuous-rushing Jordan was at last achieved we do not know. It is possible that a landslip into the narrow river bed upstream had temporarily dried up the channel, and made an apparently miraculous highway across the river ; for such a result from landslip is known to have taken place in Jordan in the thirteenth century, and it may well have taken place also in Joshua's age, and provided him with an advantage which he eagerly seized and which he could not fail to ascribe to divine aid. That would seem to be the natural interpretation of the reiterated statement that Israel crossed the Jordan dry-shod. Without some such extraordinary dislocation of the stream such a thing was impossible, for the shallowest fords of Jordan are three feet deep. And the way in which the crossing of the river is impressed upon future generations as a prodigy of divine help surely marks the fact that Joshua took advantage of some quite startling, almost incredible, occurrence, and led his people across in a sort of dream of

amazement and awe at God's singular and crowning mercy to them, which doubtless deepened their sense of destined victory, their confidence in God's miraculous power to defend and promote them.

This confidence must have been still further increased by Joshua's vision of the captain of the angelic host. The impressive little fragment of legend which records this vision breaks off tantalizingly, and is all too abrupt to be adequately understood. But somehow there came to Joshua—perhaps as he stood in prayer in some little sanctuary beside the camp at Gilgal—an intimate sense of message from God. Warrior as he is, his vision takes the form of a soldier with drawn sword who announces himself as captain of the Lord's host. And Joshua was doubtless roused afresh to a sense of divine aid in his campaign. He won new confidence and a still more determined will to succeed.

Such confident conviction is more than half the battle in any strife; and it is the secret here of the falling walls of Jericho. Jericho was overthrown by sheer menace. It made no effort to stand assault. It was unnerved and beaten by the mere display of Israel's power coming upon it exhilarated by the astonishing passage of the Jordan. It has often been pointed out that Jericho never did stand a siege. Despite many features in its situation which promised strength, the torrid atmosphere in that low-lying plain, far beneath sea-level, was enervating in the extreme. It bred a race utterly different from the hardy hillmen who, a mere twenty miles away, yet lived in the climate of a different continent. To pass from Jerusalem down the steep gorge to Jericho was to pass, in a day's walk, from a climate like mid-Europe to that of the tropics. Jericho enjoyed an extraordinary fertility. Josephus calls her neighbourhood "a divine region, the fattest in Judæa." Her year was one long summer. But her people, enervated by the extreme heat, had no fight in them. They fell

before every enemy who ever attacked them all down the ages. "That her walls fell down at the sound of Joshua's trumpets," says Sir George Adam Smith, "is no exaggeration, but the soberest summary of all her history. No great man was born in Jericho ; no heroic deed was ever done in her. She has been called 'the key' and 'the guard-house' of Judæa ; she was only the pantry. She never stood a siege, and her inhabitants were always running away." Joshua's spies had already reported to him that the people in Jericho were ready to melt away in front of him. Hence his plan seems to have been both to terrify them with a great show of power, and, after puzzling them by an apparently meaningless strategy, to surprise them by a sudden assault which would carry everything before it. The deliberate theatricality of all the circuiting of the city, with the holy ark and the horn-blowing priests leading the way, was no doubt very terrifying to the poor inhabitants crouching behind their walls, and at the same time very stimulating to Israel. A sort of hieratic dignity was thus given to the fight ; and the ridiculous ease of the subsequent entry the more easily took on a supernatural colouring in consequence.

One is reminded of the "Alleluia Victory," when Bishop Germanus, in the fifth century, led the British against an invading host of Picts and Saxons. At the sudden concerted shout of "Alleluia !" the heathen are said to have fled forthright and left the British to a bloodless victory. So, other features of this story remind one of the famous Northumbrian fight at Heavenfield near Hexham, when King Oswald fought for faith and life against the pagan Cadwallon. We are told that as Oswald slept in his tent on the night before the battle, a vision of St. Colomba came to him—a colossal figure standing in the midst of the camp, shielding beneath his robes all but a small portion of the army, and promising the king victory. Oswald therefore arose, caused a cross to be hastily planted on an eminence

as a standard for his troops, and having made his whole army kneel in prayer, sounded the charge, and speedily rolled up the opposing army across the moors and utterly routed them.

Or one thinks of the still more famous story of the vision of Constantine on the night before the battle of the Milvian Bridge, which was to set the first Christian emperor on the throne of Rome. He saw what he took to be a cross of light in the sky, and heard the words, "In this sign conquer." On the morrow he won his battle; and from that day forward the cross replaced the eagle on the standards of Rome. These are vague old legends; but memorable, like the stories of Joshua, as showing the power of faith to put impetuous valour into men, and to abash an enemy, however strongly entrenched in material resources. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

As religion advances in moral content, and men's concept of the Divine Will approximates more nearly to the standard of Jesus Christ, we find better ways of fighting God's war on earth than the way of the sword. But the fighting instinct in man is ineradicable. And his warfare with wrong grows more and more persistent as the ages go by. Only he begins to rely upon spiritual weapons, and learns that the victories of reason and good-will are far more fruitful than the clumsy victories of muscle and cunning, with whatever earnest intent these may be used. A beautiful Chinese fable tells how a courtier once reported to his sovereign the misdeeds and disloyalty of various enemies to the throne, and urged upon him the necessity of destroying them. "Very well," said the king, "they shall be destroyed." And he ordered them to his presence. On their arrival the king treated them with such courtesy and good-will that they were ashamed out of their ill-doing, and one and all rallied to him with enthusiasm. The courtier was astonished and aggrieved: "Did you not vow to destroy your enemies, O king?" "Indeed, yes," said

the king ; “ where are my enemies ? They exist no longer.” That is the true Christian secret on the lips of some old Chinese writer. And such is the warfare which brings abiding success. The moral equivalent for war is the evangelical campaign of the love that beareth all things and hopeth all things, and never faileth. The walls of every citadel are doomed to fall before that power.

A hundred years ago that great empire of China itself lay shut up behind its huge encircling walls, impenetrable to the ideas of the outer world. The Chinese were forbidden to teach their language to any foreigner on pain of death. There was, indeed, some bartering of goods with other nations at the ports. But all intrusion into the country was most jealously guarded against ; so that to win the heart and mind of China into fellowship with Christendom seemed an utterly hopeless task. But there was one man who would not be beaten. Robert Morrison went forth alone to lay siege to China. He settled on the little island of Macao at the mouth of the Canton river, and laboured amid enormous difficulties for a quarter of a century to open a way into that entrenched and stubborn country. He was single-handed, but he carried the ark of his faith with him to the onset. And the walls of China fell down flat before his bloodless attack. Decade by decade that great land has been penetrated, until, less than a century after Morrison’s death, we see a China upheaving with the ferment of European thought, and calling out on every hand for Christian instruction ; while the leaders of its republican revolution publicly ask for the prayers of the Christian Church. There is a triumphing example of the true battle of God. It demands every quality of perfect warriorship—a reckless courage, a sagacious strategy, an unbending endurance, and indomitable hope. Before such prowess as this the violent soldiership of the sword looks like the wild, unreflecting effort of irresponsible boys. Let it never be imagined that the glorious ardours of battle

are to be lost to civilized men ; that the life of the future is to be tame and fat and unadventurous. Man's three primal instincts are for battle, love and worship. These are the impulses of all our action, and the soul of all our poetry. They change in character and objective, but they can never be eradicated. Always there abides in life that which must be hated, renounced, fought against and overcome, as truly as there abides that which must be clung to, loved and cherished, and that which must be adored, obeyed and hallowed. We owe for ever a threefold duty of renunciation, attachment and submission. But the hate to which we are called is the hate of hate. And less and less shall our warfare be with physical weapons ; more and more shall it be the wrestle of the spirit which alone can convert evil will to good will among men. The romance of battle remains. As our spiritual imagination broadens and deepens it is, indeed, enhanced. It passes out of the trumpery regions of spite and malice and arrogant domination into the great areas of redemptive agony where the eternal Armageddon is waged until we " finally beat down Satan under our feet."

There is a negative pacifism, easy and sluggish, which avoids battle because it is too indifferent to energize on behalf of good. The pessimistic nihilism of Buddhist belief runs easily into that temper of *accidie* which holds that there is nothing worth striving for. But to the Christian this is one of the deadly sins. We do not win true gentleness by the mere avoidance of conflict, by the effort to disentangle ourselves from the responsibilities of life. That is a vain, unhelpful quietism. But we do have to spiritualize conflict and raise it from personal to philanthropic ends. And as we do so, physical force will have less and less place in it. Through the long ages of cruel carnage man has been slowly learning how to fight and what to fight for. His blunders have been terrible. The God-given instinct for battle has been used for base and selfish ends : it has

been dragged into the service of vainglorious ambition, of wanton sport, of wild greed. But it has been used too—often with clumsy weapons and mistaken judgments—with an intent that earnestly strove toward good. And therefore we can still look back to many a fierce war in the past, and, while we deplore its sad ferocity, yet trace in it elements of faithful heroism, of glorious sacrificial energy, which make it still shine out to us with a noble glamour. We cannot pretend to approve of the exterminating methods of a Joshua ; but, full as he was of the customary savagery of his day, he was actuated nevertheless by an honourable faith in a God of rigorous integrity, a Holy One intolerant of sin. His age had but advanced a step or two in the true knowledge of God, and therefore its wars in His Name were marred by many a deed immoral to us. But, according to their lights, the old Israelites attempted to serve their God faithfully, with a fierce fanaticism of ardour, sound in intent however blind in insight. And it was this faith of theirs which turned them into the Ironsides of that old Canaanite world.

We, with our deeper knowledge of God as Father of all mankind, have other methods to pursue in our task of getting His Will done upon earth. But we may still admire their old warrior-passion, and still gain from the tales of their warfare some impulses of valour and constancy lest we grow inert and indolent, lamely tolerant of wrong, crying “Peace !” where there is no peace, sheltering our slovenly souls under the pretence that our easy-going acquiescence is the charity of God. But God’s love is a consuming fire, an ardent, flaming passion bent upon the destruction of evil. “Righteousness at any price” is the war-cry of God, even at the price of stern punishment ; but He is more eager to bear the cost of evil than to inflict it, and it is only by sharing His battle in His spirit that we can gain His peace.

But battle there is, and ever must be. Jericho, the city

of the sensual man, must be overthrown before we can mount to Jerusalem, the city of our spiritual dreams. It looks a stiff task, but its overthrow is certain if we compass it about with the ark of a vital faith. The entrenched powers of wrong cannot stand against the assault of the Holy Ghost. Age by age we do see deep-seated evils undermined and falling, as human society wins more and more of the faith that redeems it into brotherhood, purity and truth. Each generation has its stroke to make, climbing over the brave bodies of the dead, and winning an inch onward to the final victory.

Charge once more, then, and be dumb !
Let the victors, when they come,
When the forts of folly fall,
Find thy body by the wall.

XIV

GIDEON AND
THE FLEECE

And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor ; if there be dew on the fleece only, and it be dry on all the ground, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand as thou hast spoken. And it was so : for he rose up early on the morrow, and pressed the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water.

JUDGES vi. 36-38.

The time would fail me to tell of Gideon . . . who through faith subdued kingdoms, out of weakness was made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

HEBREWS xi. 32-34.

XIV

GIDEON AND THE FLEECE

THE text of these chapters in the Book of Judges recording the exploit of Gideon is full of difficulty. Not only has the story been manipulated again and again by successive editors, but the Hebrew sentences are in several cases unreadable, and their intended meaning can only be guessed at. But in spite of the numerous little puzzles that vex our scholars, there emerges a story of romantic adventure as thrilling as was ever penned by Stevenson or Dumas. Yet, having been thus over-written and reshaped from time to time, it is a story that gives a notable instance of the need for common sense and imaginative insight if one is to get at the actual truth of it.

It opens with a description of the hard times experienced in Israel owing to incessant raids by the desert Arabs—"the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the children of the east." No harvest could be safely gathered, nor cattle and sheep safely herded. Men went armed to their field-work. Whole villages would at times be driven to take refuge in caves and forts. The land was under terror of these marauders, who swarmed across Jordan like a flight of locusts—much as our Saxon forefathers lived in daily terror of the incursions of the wild Danish vikings.

Suddenly, as we are told, there comes upon this troubled scene a prophet from the Lord. But the narrative of what he said and did stops short; and in place of it we have a

story of the angel of the Lord appearing to Gideon as he threshes wheat in his wine-press : not daring to do his work openly upon the threshing-floor—which usually stood in some prominent windy situation—for fear that some lurking Arabs might be on the watch.

Common sense suggests that we have here two variants of the same story, the angel of the Lord in the one case being identical with the prophet in the other. The angel variant is highly dramatic, full of supernatural incident—such a story as popular tradition loves to shape. But one can hardly doubt that its basis in fact is the much more prosaic account of the arrival of a prophet with his words of rebuke and encouragement. The word “angel” is very loosely used in the Old Testament. A prophetic messenger was a very true angel of God. But, once recognized as such, the reshaping of all the incidents of his visit into a supernatural mould was easily and almost unconsciously made. If the simpler account had been maintained in our Bible we should probably have been told that this prophet sought out Gideon in his home at Ophrah, and that Gideon entertained him with a meal. But in the story as elaborated by pious imagination the prophet has become a theophany of Yahweh himself, and the simple meal has become a sacrifice miraculously consumed by fire which bursts from the solid rock when Yahweh’s staff touches it. All this is the work of pious fancy colouring a sober tale of quite normal incidents, which nevertheless had such a memorable issue that God’s hand was strongly felt in them ; and so the whole thing is presented, in later telling, as a marvellous theophany of God. To get at the facts we must discount this supernaturalism, but without losing that sense of providential interference which is the root from which the supernaturalism springs.

The result of the prophet’s visit to Gideon showed that he was truly an angel of Yahweh : for we are told that the very same night Gideon got a few of his labourers together

and, under cover of the darkness, destroyed the altar of Baal which stood near their village.

These altars to the local Baals were evidently customary at this period. Probably they were not thought of as any infringement of the worship of the Lord, but as harmless additions thereto. Gideon's father, as headman of the village, had set up this altar, and the people were proud of it. But to some minds of deeper reflection and higher conscientiousness, like this wandering prophet who had come thither, the presence of these Baal altars was an affront to the Lord; and Israel's discomfiture at the hands of the Arabs was held to be a sign of the Lord's displeasure at this divided allegiance. The first step toward victory was to demolish these lingering memorials of paganism and be given up whole-heartedly to Yahweh alone. No doubt Gideon was acting upon the urgent appeal of the prophet when he thus overthrew Baal's altar. For he himself was not until then very deeply convinced of Yahweh's presence and power. When the prophet greets him with the customary phrase "The Lord be with thee"—just as we say "good-bye" to each other—Gideon catches him up with the reply: "If the Lord were with us, how could we be in such desperate straits? We are told He did great things for our forefathers of old; but where is He now?" The prophet's conversation, however, and his solemn summons to Gideon to be prepared to undertake the leadership of the people, apparently brought the latter to a more faithful frame of mind; and the destruction of the Baal's altar is the result.

When the deed was discovered next morning the villagers were desperately angry, and would have made an end of Gideon there and then had not his father parried their attack with a clever speech, pointing out that if the Baal were anything of a god he would have defended his own altar; what was the good of wasting time and spilling blood for a twopenny godlet of that sort? So the matter

rested ; and apparently Gideon was very soon in high favour again with everybody.

He was a younger son in an obscure clan, but he must already have shown something of his great quality as a soldier or the prophet would never have sought him out and impressed on him the high duty of captaincy. He had sound personal reasons for an undying hatred of the Arabs, for two of his brothers had been slain by them in some previous raid, and the duty of blood-revenge was laid upon his soul. After the prophet's visit he lingers in his farm at Ophrah, to all appearances a simple farmer still, but doubtless laying his plans against the hour that soon would strike. The site of Ophrah is unknown ; but it seems to have been in the neighbourhood of Shechem, and therefore near the head of the Wady Farah—one of the two great valleys up which the Arab incursions were bound to come, the other being the vale of Jezreel farther northward. Its position was, therefore, an exposed and dangerous one, likely to suffer the first brunt of the Arab assault. When the next raid does take place, however, it is by the northern passage : “ The children of the east assembled themselves together ; and they passed over Jordan, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon ; and he blew a trumpet ; and the people were gathered together after him.” Now he stood forth as the recognized captain of Israel, and was going to give the Arabs such battle as these nomad raiders had never before been faced with. The terrified and hunted Israelites were rallying under a new-found leader to strike a decisive blow for their country's salvation.

And here, at the threshold of the fight, we are confronted by the strange tale of the fleece. It looks, on the face of it, a mere legend of impossible miracle like the previous story of the angel striking fire out of the rock. Well ! it has been shaped into that form indeed. As it stands it is unhistorical ; just as the numbers of Gideon's army—

the twenty-two thousand who turned back from the fight, and so on—are quite unhistorical. But I think there may be fact underlying it ; that it is really on all fours with the story of Gideon's collection of a special band, and his daring reconnaissance of the enemy camp. It was not a search after a miraculous sign of God's support ; it was part of a careful general's preparation for a surprise attack. What Gideon needed for such an attack as he had planned to offer was a dark and rather thick night : clear moonlight or starlight in an unclouded heaven would have been fatal to him. But in Palestine, throughout the summer months from May to October, it is very rare for the sky to be other than cloudless. There is no rain. But in the cloudless nights dew falls very heavily. Such nights would not suit Gideon. He wanted an overcast night, when the dew would be much lessened, but when there might in consequence be more mist in the air.

Dew falls with the chilling of the air as it passes over a cold surface. This is the principle on which are made the strange dew-ponds on our English chalk hills. High on the summit of the downs one may come across these ponds, many of them maintaining their water through seasons of heavy drought, yet unfed by any spring. It is the dew alone which fills them. The method of making them is to dig a shallow basin in the chalk, lay down a layer of straw or rushes as a non-conductor, and cover the surface with clay. The chalk hills radiate much heat at night and warm the air above them with its load of moisture. But if at any spot the radiation is checked by laying a non-conductor on the ground, the air passing above this is cooled, and can no longer hold its moisture, which is dropped as dew. Hence the non-conducting bed of the dew-ponds draws down on their cold surface a great quantity of dew, and keeps them alive even in seasons when the springs fail.

Gideon's fleece would act in just the same way. Laid out upon a threshing-floor it would pick up dew even on

a night when the ground was dry. And it was for such a night that Gideon was waiting ; for a dewless night meant an overcast night in which his surprise attack might be launched with good promise of success. The story of the fleece is at bottom, then, probably nothing but a record of the trick by which Gideon sought for weather signs ; the wet fleece on the dry ground told him that the nights were thickening, and that he might, perhaps, hope for one of the dense mists which do occasionally occur in the summer nights in Palestine. So simple a trick it was that, to later editors of the story, it appeared quite inadequate as an assurance that Gideon was backed by Providence ; and so they represent him asking for a reversion of the process—for a dry fleece on a wet ground : a quite impossible happening—before he feels sure that God's aid is guaranteed to him. But this extension of the tale is the work of pure fancy. Gideon, we may be sure, felt the divine support well enough when he found a promise of just the sort of weather he needed for his enterprise. He would see God's hand in such good luck, and go forward with a high heart to his desperate adventure.

The next point was to select his men. He wanted a small band of specially careful scouts, for everything depended on their surprising the enemy. They were going to win, if at all, by sheer bluff and deception. He needed the Alan Brecks among his soldiers. And the test by which he selects them was how they drank water in the stream which sprang out at the foot of Gilboa and ran away down the valley in the face of the enemy. " Anybody," writes Sir George Adam Smith, " who has looked across the scene can appreciate the suitability of the test which Gideon imposed on his men. The stream, which makes it possible for the occupiers of the hill to hold also the well against an enemy on the plain, forbids them to be careless in their use of the water ; for they drink in face of that enemy, and the reeds and shrubs which mark its course afford ample cover

for hostile ambushes. Those Israelites, therefore, who bowed themselves down on their knees, drinking head-long, did not appreciate their position or the foe ; whereas those who merely crouched, lapping up the water with one hand while they held their weapons in the other and kept their face to the enemy, were aware of their danger and had hearts ready against all surprise."

Gideon had tested his weather and tested his men, but even now his cautious mind is not satisfied. Still another step remains to be taken. He needs to make a close reconnaissance of the enemy's camp. So off he goes after dusk with one trusty follower, crossing the stream, creeping from bush to bush or dragging himself flat on his face through the long grass, till he has crossed the valley to the roots of the opposite hill, where the Arab tents are hung and the camels tethered. They dodge the sentries and sneak in among the tents. And there, for a good omen, they hear an enemy soldier recounting his dream of the flat barley-cake that rolled into their camp and knocked one of the tents over. Gideon has seen and heard enough. Back he creeps through the line of sentries and across the valley to his own men. His instructions have meanwhile been carried out : the three hundred are awaiting orders, while the rest have withdrawn into the camp, where their fires could no doubt be seen by the Midianites. The chosen band is armed with trumpets and with pitchers in which torches are held. Thus equipped, they stealthily cross the valley once more, and breaking into three groups, approach the Arab camp at different angles. They reach their positions soon after ten o'clock, when the watch had just been changed and all was wrapped in silence again. Then Gideon gives his signal ; a great blast of trumpets and a sudden war-cry startle the night ; every soldier dashes his pitcher to the ground, and three hundred torches blaze up in the darkness from all points of the compass. The startled Arabs believe themselves overwhelmingly sur-

rounded, and make a dash down the valley eastward along the only line that seems open. In the confusion of their flight they turn upon each other in mistake for Israel. And so the whole unwieldy mass of them goes stamped-ing and blundering down toward Jordan. But Gideon's messengers rouse the country-side, and hem them in. Their two princes Oreb and Zeeb, the Raven and the Wolf (for the Arabs, like the Red Indians and our own Boy Scouts, loved these animal titles, and maintain them even to-day), were slain, and their heads brought up to Gideon, who was already across Jordan pursuing the remnant that had escaped. Another great victory is won on the edge of the desert by Gideon's tired and hungry, but now exalted, troops. The two Arab kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, are taken, and the whole nomad host scattered in wild flight into the eastern wilderness.

It was one of Israel's most superb and unqualified victories. Gideon returned home burdened with spoil. In the enthusiasm of the hour the people would fain have made him king. But the great soldier refuses, and goes back to his village and his farm again, begging only such portion of the enemy's gold as will serve to make him an ephod—some image, probably, or other contrivance, plated with precious metal, that seems to have been used in connection with the casting of lots and the seeking of divine oracles. So the land had rest from the Arab raiders, and the man who had saved it turned back to his farming with the simplicity of Cincinnatus.

Gideon is the most attractive figure among the Judges or Captains of Israel—an unassuming, modest man, politic and suave, but a most shrewd and vigilant soldier of indomitable courage. Men said the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. And what a wholesome piety it was in old Israel that used such language about the mental and physical qualities of good generalship! They saw the presence of the Lord's Spirit in any great human faculties by which

society was benefited. They saw it even in the mere muscular strength of Samson—that huge, incompetent, undisciplined bullock of a man : that strength of his, used for the deliverance of his people, was a gift of God. Much more was the brilliant generalship of Gideon an inspired faculty.

Old Israel never dreamt of restricting divine inspiration to certain narrow departments of our being. All sound faculties and noble accomplishments were inspired by God. Did they not declare that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Bezaleel and Aholiab, the artificers, to make them cunning of skill to devise the ornaments of the Tabernacle ? Their minds were free from that foolish dichotomy of sacred and secular which has so narrowed and warped the conception of religion in many societies. They understood that art cannot be beautiful, nor soldiering brave, nor statesmanship wise, unless God's Spirit be in men ; and that where we see beauty and courage and sound policy, there, so far forth, we see the Spirit of God manifested. Gideon's superb generalship was as much a God-given faculty as Samuel's fervid conscientiousness. Great physical or mental powers deliberately perverted to base ends they would not have spoken of as being under God's inspiration. But they were God's gifts, and were capable of inspired use. For the Spirit of God, as Isaiah said, was a spirit entering into and governing all the faculties of man : it was the spirit of moral insight or wisdom, and it was also the spirit of witty intelligence and gumption in the application of that wisdom ; it was the spirit of prudent and suave counsel, and it was also the spirit of forceful determination to get things done ; it was the spirit of knowledge and competence, as well as the spirit of reverent humbleness that prevents the folly of a swollen head. It is revealed in the heightening and ennoblement of the whole man—intellect, emotions and will alike. A man may be inspired to fight well as to preach well ; to make things well or to rule men well.

Warrior and artisan, statesman, prophet and priest are all capable of the divine inbreathing. And we serve our God by putting out the best talent we have, whatever its nature. The story of the acrobat who did his best to praise God in a French church by turning his most remarkable somersaults in front of a statue of the Virgin till he sweated and fainted with his effort, expresses a true devoutness ; and one may be sure that God, despite the Psalmist, took delight in the legs of that man.

The Divine Spirit guides us upward step by step, bidding us do the best we can in our given conditions ; inspiring a true intent, however imperfect our means ; and accepting our blundering, crude accomplishments whenever the effort of true sacrifice underlies them. It is a sorry thing that men should be called to war. And we pray for the time to come when there will always be hope of a just settlement of dispute apart from battle. But we do not have to wait for ideal conditions of life before the Spirit of God can exhibit itself in human affairs. In the past the only way to break oppression often has been by war alone, and the soldier has acted under consecration in his perilous labour. "*Iustum est bellum quibus necessarium, et pia arma, quibus nulla, nisi in armis, relinquitur spes.*" Though the battle-flags one day be furled, the patriots have not fought in vain. The sword of a Gideon or a Garibaldi was verily the sword of the Lord. And the legends of their valour ring down the ages to quicken courage in us for the bloodless, but still more difficult, exploits of a later day. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews knew where to turn for inspiritment when he wanted to rally the young Church to the reckless adventure of the gospel and to patient endurance of fierce trials. He bade his comrades look back to the heroes of old, who had many a rough and dirty piece of work to do, but who, through faith, "out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Let their

example fortify us, as the scene of their exploits has become the symbol of our Christian warfare.

For the scene of Gideon's victory was that plain of Esdraelon or Megiddo where all Israel's most critical fights took place. Here it was that Barak had defeated Sisera ; here it was, in a later generation, that Saul fell with the flower of his army before the Philistines ; and here, later still, Josiah was mortally wounded in the fight against Necho of Egypt. This plain was the inevitable battlefield of Palestine, just as the carse of Stirling was for Scotland ; for here alone, in that mountainous country, lay a practicable road for chariots and cavalry, and space enough to deploy a great army. The highway from Egypt to Assyria lay along this plain which cuts the hills of Palestine asunder. And it was, therefore, on this stretch of rough prairie that Israel's enemies continually encamped, and the place became in Hebrew imagination the one pre-eminent, enduring seat of war. Hence, in the Apocalypse, when we have a vision presented to us of the eternal strife of God against the powers of hell, it is this historic battlefield of Megiddo which gives name and shape to the scene : the archangel Michael leads out the heavenly host upon familiar ground, and the whole world is summoned together "to the battle of that great day of God Almighty in a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon."

That transfiguring of Israel's old battlefield into the scene of God's final victory is surely a very sublime stretch of imagination. And it typifies the whole secular effort of mankind to lift the instinct of battle above all private or sectional ends on to the plane of the divine purpose. But in that spiritual warfare we shall need all the resourcefulness and daring and fortitude of Gideon. As the scene of his victory has become the symbolic scene of God's victory, so his prowess in arms may well be a lasting symbol of all valiant sainthood, and the Church may still rally her recruits to God's banner with memory of the cry :

“The sword of the Lord and of Gideon.” And above all, the canniness of Gideon in the memorable episode of the fleece may well teach us the much-needed lesson that sagacity is indispensable in God’s service ; that our brains as well as our hearts are for His use ; and that there is no chance of our routing the enemy until we understand God to be a Spirit of Intelligence who seeks to quicken our wits, as well as a Spirit of Goodness who seeks to mould our characters. God cannot be well served by fools. Gideon fought with his head ; and he refused to be hindered by the duffers and the cowards. And a little rigorous weeding out of the fools from the Christian army might have equally fruitful results in our day. The pious idiots ruin the campaign Away with them !

XV

A CHILD AS PROPHET

And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. . . .
And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place,
and ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the
ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep ; that the Lord called
Samuel : and he answered, Here am I.

I. SAMUEL iii. 1-4.

A CHILD AS PROPHET

THE Books of Samuel and Kings seem to be compiled from various old scraps of literature : biographical sketches, court memoirs, folk-tales. One early fragment is the biography of Samuel, preserved in part in the first three chapters of the book that bears his name, and continued, possibly, in the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters. It is, so far as it goes, a very telling narrative, giving a picture of Samuel's attitude and influence in the national life considerably different from the presentation of him in other parts of the book, which are supposed to have been written later and to be governed by certain dogmatic views about past history.

This early document tells of Samuel's birth, his dedication, his boyhood in the little sanctuary at Shiloh, half-way between Jerusalem and Samaria ; and of his first startling revelation from God, and establishment as a recognized prophet. It is an attractive tale, one vivid little vignette following another from page to page : first the poor, tearful, childless wife mumbling her prayers in the temple, and the old priest accusing her of being drunk ; then, after her child was born and weaned, the visit of mother and child to the temple—so glad a visit this time—when the little fellow is dedicated to God, and left there at Shiloh to be brought up by old Eli as a sort of apprentice in the work of the sanctuary ; then the picture of the growing boy in his short linen skirt, busy with his simple duties, and

made happy with a new cloak once a year when his parents came up to Shiloh for the harvest festival ; and finally, the dramatic night scene in the temple when God's voice speaks so awesomely to the lad.

The world's art galleries have, unfortunately, often been prolific sources of popular misconception as regards Scripture history. And if one adds to them the stained-glass windows of our churches and the old-time pictorial family Bibles, it is a wonder that any sound realistic knowledge of Bible history ever manages to hold its ground. Here is a case in point. Sir Joshua Reynolds' picture of the infant Samuel—that graceful picture of a small child saying his prayers—has given all modern English folk a quite incorrect notion of this famous incident. Samuel was not a mere baby when God's Word came to him. He must have been some four years old, probably more, when he was first brought to Shiloh ; for Jewish women did not wean their children before the third year, sometimes not until the fifth or sixth ; and it is difficult to think of a mere baby having been left with Eli. And since his arrival in Shiloh his mother, we are told, had meanwhile given birth to five other children. This means that Samuel must now have been a boy of at least thirteen years old, and very likely older. He was a growing adolescent, at the age when the moral sense begins to awaken, and boys and girls begin to concern themselves with moral and religious problems and to form judgments on the life around them. The word "child" in the narrative is quite indeterminate, for the Hebrew word so translated may cover anyone from a mere babe to a man of forty. We are probably safe in imagining Samuel as a boy in his middle 'teens. There is nothing utterly abnormal, therefore, about his vision, as there would have been had he been an infant. It is but one very striking example of the sensitive conscientiousness of young folk in their 'teens, and the indelible impression that may be made upon them by their first recognition of

a real message from God coming through their own consciences.

The lad Samuel, pursuing his temple duties, was in daily contact with the sons of Eli, two greedy fellows who made a habit of stealing more than their due share of the sacrificial meat. These two cads not only committed wanton sacrilege in grabbing the dedicated portions of the sacrifice for the pleasure of their own bellies, but even caused their servants to seize the pilgrims' offerings—if necessary with rough assault and battery. In this way they became a by-word throughout the land; the names of Hophni and Phineas stank in the nostrils of Israel. Old Eli heard the rumours of misconduct and the popular murmurings; but, though he protested, he was too weak a man to interfere effectively and stop the horrid scandal of his sons' misdeeds. He was old and almost blind, quite unable to hold in check these men of Belial. So things went on from bad to worse, and the sanctuary of Shiloh, where the sacred Ark was housed, was losing all its prestige as a centre for the national worship. The very repute of Israel's God was itself threatened. Could He not defend His own Ark from sacrilege? If not, what was He better than the neighbour Baals?

Some new force was needed to cope with this situation. A great work for God was waiting to be done; and a young, vigorous, clean conscience was needed to perceive it and to herald it. That conscience discovered itself in the young temple apprentice.

Like any honest boy, Samuel must long since have perceived the baseness of Eli's sons, and scorned them. How often a child will intuitively see into a man's character, and judge him with quiet, steady eyes even while the grown-up world allows him to pass muster! Childhood has a quick sense for essential baseness in a man. But here the wickedness was flagrant and notorious, and the popular verdict was there to back up the boy's intuition of wrong. Then

it may have happened, as we are told in the latter part of the second chapter, that an unnamed prophet came one day to Shiloh and remonstrated with Eli, threatening him and his house with ruin. The actual words put into the mouth of this prophet are words that could not have been uttered in Samuel's day: they have clear references to later historical developments. And it is therefore disputable whether the story of this prophet's visit to Shiloh belongs at all to the original biography of Samuel. The point cannot be decisively determined. But it is possible that such a prophet did come upon the scene with his stern warning. And if so, his visit must have still further stirred the conscience of the boy already in revolt against the coarse doings of his masters in the temple. One imagines him beginning, with the fine impetuosity of youth, to make up his mind for a struggle against Hophni and Phineas. Their conduct becomes the engrossing material of his reflections. He cannot get the scandal of it out of his mind, day or night. His own innocent ardour for God's worship is insulted every hour by the presence of these sensual brutes. So the lad was brooding week after week, preoccupied with an intense feeling of moral outrage. It was the under-current of all his thoughts. He awoke with it in the morning and went to bed with it at night.

Well! when one's mind is passionately preoccupied with a subject it will go on working upon that subject even in sleep. New resolutions and revelations may come to men even out of their dreams. The subconscious mind may carry forward the waking thoughts to a new climax, and the man reawakens with an amazed sense of something given to him from without. So a Coleridge will compose his *Kubla Khan* while he sleeps, and wake up with nothing more to do than to write down hastily whatever he can remember of a poem created entirely by his subconscious mind in dream. So a Stevenson will tell us how his Brownies came to him in sleep and invented turning-points

in his stories which his wakeful mind had been toiling after unsuccessfully throughout the day. Any part of our mental self may thus go on working—the conscience as well as the imagination. A man starts out of sleep with a new idea or a new resolve, and he says God has spoken to him. And it is God who has spoken, if conscience be God's voice. The divine origin of the message is not, indeed, proved by the method and circumstance of its coming, but by its quality. As St. John of the Cross, that very sane saint, declares : “ I am terrified by what passes among us in these days. Anyone who has barely begun to meditate, if he becomes conscious of these words during his self-recollection, pronounces them forthwith to be the work of God, and, considering them to be so, says, ‘ God has spoken to me,’ or ‘ I have had an answer from God.’ But it is not true : such an one has only been speaking to himself. Besides, the affection and desire for these words, which men encourage, cause them to reply to themselves and then to imagine that God has spoken.” That is plain common sense. Yet St. John is writing thus only in order to guard the truth, of which he is entirely convinced, that God's voice is to be heard at times through these channels of the under-mind by men spiritually prepared for such auditions.

It is to be noted, further, that such communications sometimes seem like actual objective voices—not mere thoughts stealing unawares upon the mind. So Jean d'Arc hears them, or Teresa. A man may hear himself addressed by name, as did Peter on the house-top at Joppa, or Paul on the Damascus road, or Francis when he was summoned in the little ruined chapel to build God's church. And so it was with the lad Samuel. A voice so real rings in his ear ~~that~~ he thinks it is old Eli calling him from the next room. Only after repeated disillusionment is he convinced that it is not Eli at all. It is not the voice of any human neighbour. It is the voice of the Holy Spirit in

his own heart—his own higher nature asserting itself audibly amid his hesitant and confused brooding, and laying high summons upon him to become the herald of God's judgment. His mind had hovered about such thoughts for months or years. Now the matter was clinched. Out of his very sleep the lad is called to take public stand against the men of Belial. To denounce them would probably be dangerous : they were not the men to suffer an interloping boy to make mischief for them without paying him heavily in revenge. No wonder Samuel had hesitated and brooded long over his duty. But the climax had come at last. The imperative voice rang clear. He was called to a man's task. "Man am I grown, a man's work must I do . . . live pure, speak true ; else wherefore born ?" And so in that awful and holy night as he slept in the sanctuary, this youth accepted his call to be God's prophet and rose in the morning with God's burden on his soul.

He shuddered at his task. It was a cruel word to utter to old Eli. What he felt compelled to say, what he was persuaded God had told him to say, for he had wakened to hear it ringing in his ears that night, was a word of doom : "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which both ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. Thou shalt tell Eli" (this is probably the correct rendering) "that I am about to punish his house for ever, because he knew that his sons were blaspheming God, and he restrained them not." A terrible word for a boy to declaim to an old man, his benefactor and second father ! As he begins to busy himself about his customary tasks at dawn, he wonders how he will find opportunity to deliver this awful message. But Eli makes it easy for him, commanding him on oath to tell him all that God had put it into his heart to say. And the old man bows before it, broken and humbled : "It is the Lord : let him do what seemeth him good." The facts were so unquestionable that Eli can have no doubt about the divine origin of such a message. His

own conscience acquiesces in it as the authentic voice of the Lord. In consequence the young Samuel at once begins to be pointed at as a coming prophet. His repute spreads up and down the land. Whether or no his courageous outburst did anything to check the wickedness of Eli's sons we are not told. But very shortly afterwards the doom was fulfilled : Hophni and Phineas are slain in battle, and Eli dies from shock the same day. And Samuel is left master of the sanctuary at Shiloh and a recognized leader of the people.

The story brings one to reflect upon the debt which the adult world owes to youth. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained a stronghold for thyself, that thou mightest still the enemy." There are, in good sooth, many ways in which this old world is saved by its youth—in which our children are the defenders of God among us. It is they who keep the vision of fresh innocence and happy trust amid a society soiled, compromised, hardened, and suspicious with the passage of the years. It is they who keep the candle of hope burning, and who quicken the pulse of disinterested love in us. Who that has read it will not remember the picture of Marie in Mark Rutherford's *Deliverance*—that dull and tiresome little girl who was so transfigured by her mother's illness till her father saw her like an angel of light ? "I remember once going to her cot in the night, as she lay asleep, and almost breaking my heart over her with remorse and thankfulness—remorse that I, with blundering stupidity, had judged her so superficially ; and thankfulness that it had pleased God to present to me so much of His own divinest grace. Fool that I was not to be aware that messages from Him are not to be read through the envelope in which they are enclosed. I never should have believed, if it had not been for Marie, that any grown-up man could so love a child. But now I doubt whether a love of that particular kind could be felt towards any grown-up human being—love so pure, so

imperious, so awful. My love to Marie was love of God Himself as He is—an unrestrained adoration of an efflux from Him, adoration transfigured into love, because the revelation had clothed itself with a child's form. I may appear extravagant, but I appeal to Jesus Himself for justification. I had seen the Kingdom of God through a little child."

But this reflex action of innocent childhood upon adult hearts is not all of the debt that age owes to youth. Youth makes its own positive contributions towards our betterment. Every young generation comes forward with its new ardent idealism, and eagerly plunges into the fray when its forbears are wearying a little and perhaps striking truce with evil. It is to youth that we have to look for our reforms ; for the new intellectual and emotional waves that swing forward to carry the tide of our life a little higher yet. We are always expectantly awaiting the new poet and the new prophet, and it is among the young that we must seek for them. Each generation does its task, and then looks to its successors to carry on along some new line of advance, "lest one good custom should corrupt the world." And old age is graceless enough if it has not this hope and trust in youth. As George Meredith wittily declares : "It is a point in the education of parents that they should learn to apprehend humbly the compliment of being outwitted by their own offspring." It is, however, not the mere fact of the younger generation so frequently having better educational advantages than their elders, as decade by decade the institutions of social life improve, that one's reflection dwells on ; but rather the fresh vision which youth, just because it is youth, brings to bear upon life—its clear intuitions and its uncompromising ardour. It spurs forward a tired world, and brings a keen blade among our blunted weapons. "In holy array, like dew from the womb of the morning, thou hast the bands of thy youthful warriors." So sang the psalmist as he contemplated

the flower of Israel's youth lying armed in their glittering equipment on the hill-sides when the sun rose to call them into battle. And so, in effect, we all look toward the great array of young folk who fill our roadways of a morning on their way to school, carrying their country's hope in their satchels. They are the chief source of our inspiritment, the fertile field for the growth of new enterprises and higher ambitions. In the world's childhood lies our perennial reinforcement in the unending war against wrong.

But if our Samuels are to be of service to our Elis they must be dedicated to God. They must be trained in His worship from their earliest years, if age expects to get anything valuable out of them in their youth to refresh its own tired vision. They must be christened, immersed in Christ, before they can become channels of the revolutionizing power of Christ; otherwise their hot eagerness will but lead our world into new follies. Jesus Himself was presented in the Temple, educated, saturated with all the best influence of the religion of His people, before it became possible for Him to herald a still higher faith and found the ultimate Church. No ceremony can be too public or too impressive for the fixing in our memory of this great need to dedicate childhood. It is a wise, strong and beautiful act for parents to present their children to God in the open temple, and pledge them to faith, obedience and the renunciation of evil. Such a pledge, when it is made really operative by sedulous and loving discipline, is a sure guarantee that the parents will be ultimately blessed by hearing God's voice through their own offspring. The youthful generation, when its time comes, will then assuredly step forward with its fresh visions of God to advance our world one further step toward the ultimate kingdom. But everything depends upon whether or no we do really dedicate our children, and immerse them in the cleansing waters of our own faith and love and hope—baptize them, that is to say, into Christ. The most appalling waste among men is

the waste of the souls of children who grow up uncared for and undisciplined, never won for the worship of God, never touched into holy dream and vision through His sanctuary. The world may now and again have obscurely buried some mute, inglorious Milton ; but much more certainly it is, in every age, leaving unawakened the consciences of many young Samuels, and losing voice after voice that might have spoken for God among us, if they had first been taught to listen for God. The pity of it—that these fresh boys and girls should be robbed of their spiritual achievements by our neglect ! We need them all. We need them bitterly. Every child is meant to be a new word of God made flesh for us ; aye, and will be so, unless our carelessness thwarts the Divine Purpose and turns these potential messengers of His into a sad crowd of the spiritually deaf and dumb. Our negligence in dedicating childhood holds back the fair future of mankind. For we can never be sure of steady moral progress in this world unless the young generation is a christened generation.

Keep the young generations in hail,
And bequeath them no tumbled house !

The prophets and saviours of mankind do not arise haphazard. It may puzzle us to trace their inborn qualities to their ultimate hereditary sources ; but the part that nurture plays in their development is frequently not difficult to trace, and the old saying is not far wrong that there was never a great man who had not a great mother. " Give me the children for the first seven years of their life," says a wise priest, " and I care not who has them afterwards." We must put the child into the sanctuary of a pious nurture if in his youth he is to see visions. And we want our young to see visions. If youth grows cynical society is doomed. But as long as there are young hearts, like the lad Samuel's, sensitive to God and alertly responsive to His calling, we need never despair of the world however sorry a condition

it has got into. Their fresh consciences will come to its rescue, rising in vigorous protest against sins we have grown so used to that we do not heed them—old encrusted wrongs that seem to us a part of the very fabric of life. Age grows conservative, sedentary, sceptical. God renews the world with youth, ardent, adventurous, idealistic. We are saved by the darling young.

XVI

THE TRAGEDY OF SAUL

Saul, a choice young man, and a goodly : and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he.

I. SAMUEL ix. 2.

Now the spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.

I. SAMUEL xvi. 14.

XVI

THE TRAGEDY OF SAUL

“**H**OW are the mighty fallen !” That keynote of David’s lament finds echo in all our hearts as we read the pathetic tragedy of Israel’s first king. Here was a personality of dazzling splendour tumbled into ruin through uncontrollable derangement of the mind.

When we first catch sight of Saul he stands without peer, a man of superb physique, head and shoulders above all others. He is of generous valour ; he is pious and decent ; he is honest and rigorously just. The prophet Samuel, looking round for a national leader, has no doubt that Saul is worthy of the consecrating oil. Here was a man born to be king.

Yet an early incident shows the mental excitability of Saul. On his way home from Ramah, where Samuel had anointed him, he met a band of “prophets”—professional religious zealots rather like, perhaps, the Moslem dervishes—and joined them in their wild music, their frantic ecstasy. It was an extraordinary thing for a man in his position to do—the son of a wealthy landowner associating with these fanatical men—and it provoked contemptuous comment : much as if a prince in our country should suddenly join the Salvation Army, and beat out dithyrambic music in the streets, like Bernard Shaw’s professor in *Major Barbara* ; or throw in his lot with the Shakers and begin to emulate Meredith’s *Jump-to-Glory Jane*. Also, was it a healthy modesty, or was it, perhaps, a

trembling self-distrust, a premonition of instability, which made Saul, according to one of our narratives, hide himself away when the people wished to acclaim him king?

However, all went well in the outset of his reign. It is only after quarrel has broken out between himself and Samuel that mental disease begins to trouble him. What the cause of that quarrel was we cannot be sure; for here, as is so often the case with Old Testament history, we have variant accounts from different sources. All the passages which represent Samuel as loath to countenance a king in Israel must be eliminated from the story: they reflect the ideas of the Deuteronomic age, when Israel had suffered sad enough experience of kings to provoke doubt as to whether human kingship was compatible with the rule of God. In the original narrative of the monarchy Samuel has no scruples about establishing kingship. Similarly the story about Samuel denouncing and rejecting Saul because the latter had ventured to offer sacrifice in the prophet's absence also reflects the ideas of a later age, and cannot be accepted as historical. A much more likely cause of their quarrel is the incident of the Amalekite war, when Saul had spared Agag in contradiction of Samuel's fierce command. But, whatever the cause, tradition certainly told of a bitter quarrel between the aged prophet and his younger *prince*. And Saul, being a man of religious, even superstitious, temper, was disheartened and disturbed by the old prophet's curse.

He was scrupulous enough even to have sacrificed his son Jonathan for a trifling disobedience to a vow of which the young man was ignorant—so eager was he to preserve a loyal piety. Yet he found himself anathematized by the one man who stood forth as Yahweh's oracle. And he did not well know why. He felt himself causelessly ill-used and deserted. He brooded and grew sullen, and recurrent fits of madness overtook him. Poor simple-minded man, bewildered with responsibilities he had never

sought, and forsaken by the prophet who had led him into them; trying to do his best, and yet always being told that he was wrong—that passionate, excitable mind of his turned in upon itself and grew clouded with doubt, with resentment, and at length with jealousy. For as he himself fell into disfavour, his young armour-bearer, David, the clever minstrel and heroic soldier, rose by leaps and bounds to universal popularity. His own children were never tired of sounding David's praises. Michal was eager to marry him; Jonathan seemed willing to play second fiddle to him, and thus endanger his own heirship to the throne. Saul, one feels, was a man of magnanimous intention, but he needed the guidance of a stronger character and more politic intellect than his own; and he had it not. He was one of those men of splendid physique and engaging simplicity of heart who never grow beyond a rather boyish mentality, and are soon puzzled and abashed amid the conflict of affairs unless they have some astuter and more weighty brain to consult with: admirable executants, but blundering governors. And there was a strain of hysteria in him which developed more strongly the more he was thrust upon himself, the more he got into difficulty, the more he sank under the apparent disapproval of God. His temper grew suspicious and morose, till it broke into recurrent paroxysms of murderous frenzy.

The pitiful memory of Saul reminds one of that poor old mad English king, George III. "Some slight lucid moments he had," writes Thackeray, "in one of which the Queen, desiring to see him, entered the room, and found him singing a hymn, and accompanying himself at the harpischord. When he had finished he knelt down and prayed aloud for her, and then for his family, and then for the nation, concluding with a prayer for himself, that it might please God to avert his heavy calamity from him, but if not, to give him resignation to submit. He then burst into tears, and his reason again fled."

There is nothing so pitiable as a mind deranged. Bodily disease can be a discipline from which the personality grows ever clearer and stronger, astonishing us with its courage and its grace ; and we all see the truth in Stevenson's aphorism that " the truest health is to be able to do without it." But in mental disease the very machinery of the moral nature is itself dislocated ; the self is deposed, and an inner anarchy prevails. The purest natures may suddenly be loosened into wild crime, which they can control no more than one can control one's dreams in sleep. Here is humanity's nightmare—this knowledge of complex forces in our mental make-up which may burst into rebellion, and perch some upstart parody of ourselves upon the throne of our individuality. The amazing and abhorrent records of " secondary personalities " make us all feel the possibility of psychic earthquake in our own natures, and we stand shuddering on the edge of " the abysmal deeps of personality." How are we to be sure of ourselves when a loving and dutiful girl like Mary Lamb can suddenly run amok and murder her helpless bed-ridden mother ? Hers was a bright intellect and a virtuous character, yet these gifts did not save her from the perpetration of frightful deeds in her mania. Is there any picture more full of pathos than that of Charles and Mary Lamb, both in tears, wending their way to the asylum where she must again be left until the recurring symptoms of insanity had once more disappeared ? Charles Lamb's heroic and self-effacing service of his sister, his unwearying tenderness, his faith in her and his efforts to engage her intellect in wholesome and beautiful employment, may indeed show us a pathway toward the curative treatment of insanity. There will be no cure without love, and love's infinite patience. Yet the unchancy and ghoulisn horror of it remains. So slight a tilting of the scales, and the precariously balanced self sinks into mad confusion ! There may be hope that our psychologists will dig to the roots of mental disease, and be

able to safeguard us from it in the future by detecting and eliminating its causative elements in our subconsciousness. But meanwhile men seem to be the helpless prey of dæmonic forces against whose attack they have no armour. A Saul is overtaken by insanity in the midst of honest intent, without any deliberate cultivation of malice and devilry, through no apparent fault of his own : the pitiful victim of some hereditary weakness, some subtle defect in training, some unsuitability of circumstance : so complex is the tangle of life we share together, so dependent are we on myriad influences from the whole psychic atmosphere of the world, suffering inscrutably with and for each other, and awaiting for our safety the general social growth in wholesomeness and wisdom.

Every individual has within himself a replica of the total good and evil forces that sway the history of mankind. Some unfortunate condition into which we are thrust may undermine the struggling authority of the inward good, and unseat the healthy reason. We are lucky if the blessing of a sound environment gives sufficient reinforcement to the good in us to keep sanity in the saddle. But no man can boast of his isolated strength to keep the true self intact. In our youth we are all dual personalities, and it is not our sheer will that determines the ultimate sane supremacy, though our will co-operates in the issue. "Is he we call a young man an individual—who is a pair of alternately kicking scales? If they wait for circumstance, that steady fire will fuse into one," says Meredith, "the two men composing most of us at the outset of life ; but throttling is the custom between them, and we are used to see men of murdered halves. These men have what they fought for : they are unaware of any guilt that may be charged against them, though they know that they do not embrace life." The sheer struggle of the will to make unity out of the inner duality may itself leave the nature pollarded and warped, the prey of strangled and yet living

powers that lack their natural outlet, and break forth at last in some hideous distortion, unless a happy environment has given scope for rounded growth and harmonized the clashing desires in us. The part played by the conscious will cannot, indeed, be underrated. The Jekyll-and-Hyde contest is fundamental. The deliberate indulgence of our lower passions may develop a devilish self in us which at length ousts the better man in us altogether, and we may awake in horror to discover that we have created a Frankenstein which we cannot subdue—from which only some explosive conversion by the grace of God can deliver us. But the will does not act in a vacuum. Circumstance, too, has its part to play ; and without its happy help the purest will may reach victory only at a cost of such strait-jacketing of the nature as may leave many of its powers in smouldering rebellion, working unconscious evil, and plotting some future anarchy in us. The mind snaps with the strain of repression, and diabolism breaks forth in a personality seemingly secure ; or the corruption of the “murdered halves” we carry in us enfeebles the mind to imbecility. So men suffer from the defects of their social inheritance, from the lack of right fellowship, and from the pressure upon them of untoward circumstance with which they have no power to cope. We are all laying traps for one another in this world, and the innocent individual vicariously suffers from our general deficiency of good-will and clear wisdom.

We are but on the threshold, yet, of psychological knowledge. Only dimly do we begin to perceive the subtle and far-reaching ramifications of the mind : its strange borderlands where distinct individualities seem to overlap and blend ; the uncanny cellarages of the subconscious where alien belongings are stored. The story of Saul gropes amid this mystery. In its opening incident we are face to face with the second-sight of Samuel : “The Lord had told Samuel in his ear

a day before Saul came, saying, To-morrow about this time I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin." Saul has been scouring the country for his lost herd of asses, and all his inquiry has been vain ; but Samuel is able to tell him, before he has mentioned his business, that the asses are found. Old history is full of such tales of second-sight, and modern research has sifted and classified them by the hundred. Depending as we do for all ordinary purposes upon our five senses, such tales provoke our scepticism. But our five senses are only the main high roads of our communication with the outer world. And how blocked and broken these often are ! We have not the fiftieth part of the power of scent in a dog : he has evidence of innumerable things which our blunt noses never tell us of. And if our great main roads are half in disuse, we need not be surprised at our ignorance of many by-paths of communication upon which most of us never set foot at all. Life has other senses, other channels of mental communication, than those we are accustomed to. The homing instinct of the bird, the silent conversation of a colony of ants, are outstanding proofs of this. And in a world of such surprises we need not suppose that our everyday working consciousness exhausts our potential faculties—that there are not latent in us many senses as yet unexplored because we have no normal use for them. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

And just as this unexplored penumbra of the human mind confronts us in the opening passages of the life of Saul, so again at its close we are face to face with our pathetic human questionings of these dim powers on our mental borderlands. The belief in witchcraft is at once a recognition of the fact of these indeterminate powers and a confession of our superstitious ignorance about them. Wizardry in various forms has held its place down the centuries because abnormal faculties of mind undeniably exist and subdue ordinary folk with astonishment wherever they are exercised;

while, on the other hand, it has again and again been condemned as dangerous and impious by sober minds because of a common-sense conviction that the Will of God is not to be discovered through any means so ill-understood and of such haphazard occurrence. That Will is to be apprehended by our universal and normal faculties of reason, heart and conscience, not by the mediumship of bizarre and freakish faculties in which average human nature has no share. But, when the conscience is clouded, and the reason weary and perplexed, and the heart hungry for comfort, our poor human nature, catching at any straw, will turn to thaumaturgy and necromancy in the hope of finding in occult regions a revelation of the God it has failed to perceive through those normal powers that give us our dignity. Poor Saul makes his feverish journey to the witch of Endor, hoping to gain a verdict that will allay the dread suspicions that conscience and circumstance alike make obvious to him. Alas ! the ghost of Samuel does but reiterate the threats and comminations of the living prophet, and echo every horrible presage that already filled Saul's spirit with alarm. Well might he have said : " I need no ghost to come from the grave to tell me this. Can he tell me no way of escape and recovery ? Has he, from his vantage-ground in the beyond, no message of mercy, nothing but the old preachment of doom and divine vindictiveness ? " The voice of Samuel in the story is, indeed, a thoroughly earthly voice—a mere replica of the old Samuel, untouched by any higher insight such as one might have expected his disembodied life to give him : his God is still a fierce God thirsting for the blood of Amalek. And that seems to be the general character of such supposed communications from the dead : they merely reflect the standard of ideas current among those who inquire for them. Such communication may be possible ; it ill behoves a Christian with his faith in immortality and the communication of saints to deny it ; and if it ever be

conclusively proved, it will open up a new region for science and add interest to our exploration of life. But it is doubtful if it can add anything to our religion. The foundations of religion lie elsewhere than here. And the communications of necromancy must do something better than merely reflect the current notions of the day before they can be accepted as authentic, as anything more than the reflections of the inquirers subconsciously flung upon the screen of the medium's mind. It would be jolly to talk with our dead friends ; but one would not expect them to tell us anything about God that we do not already perceive through Christ. At best they would but interestingly confirm the truth we know. And for those who hold the faith there is no real need for such confirmation : they cannot be surer than they are already of the love of God. While those who have it not will be building on a very shaky foundation if they rely upon sense-impressions instead of upon conscience. Christ's warning holds good : " If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

However, the incident with the witch of Endor is mainly significant to us, not for any light it can throw upon modern researches into the occult, for it is far too loosely narrated to be of any evidential value to us, but rather as giving evidence of the indestructible sense men have had of a strange borderland of mental experience, which they have been all too apt to regard with superstition. It completes the impression of weirdness that we receive from the whole life story of Saul. He moves bewildered through an uncanny world, brave as a lion to face any enemy of flesh and blood, but startled into fear, like an animal stalked by invisible hunters, with a sense of encompassing spiritual forces that he cannot understand. He goes into his last battle a doomed man. Principalities and powers are against him. His mind is full of gloom and terror. But at least he will die game. There is a sort of savage honour in the man as we glimpse

him in those closing moments on Gilboa—fighting to the last ditch, his army shattered, his sons lying dead, and at length, as the enemy press round to capture him, plunging his own sword into his breast with a final undishonoured acceptance of failure and the tomb.

So we live out our puzzled and distracted lives in this labyrinthine world, fighting amid the mist and murk of our ignorance, played upon by inscrutable powers, and following each other, unvictorious, into the silence.

We are such stuff as dreams are made of,
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.

Ah ! the admirable bravery of mankind ! so bewildered, yet so dauntless ! Moving about in worlds not recognized, and yet holding the headship of all created things ! By what is noble in itself let mankind judge life's mysterious meaning. So much is dark about us : our own strength but a faint element in the majestic strength of nature ; our own knowledge but an infinitesimal fragment of the total truth of things. We are overwhelmed by the unsearchable strength and wisdom of Deity.

Each faculty tasked
To perceive Him, has gained an abyss, where a dewdrop was asked.

How shall we doubt, then, that our own love for each other is but a tiny spark over against the great fire of love in the heart of God ?

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it ? Here, the parts
shift ?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what Began ?
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all this for man,
And dare doubt He alone shall not help him, who yet alone can ?

Saul had his friends in the hour of disaster. Human love did all it could to save him. Those men of Jabesh-Gilead, who owed him their freedom from days long gone by, did not forget their indebtedness, and they took

heroic risks to rescue his beloved body from the walls of Bethshan, where it shamefully hung, and to carry it home for noble burial. Was God's love less urgent than theirs? If they, in their impotence, risked all to snatch Saul's body from shame, would not God make effort to redeem and restore the soul He created?

Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch Saul the mistake, Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now,—and bid him awake From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find himself set Clear and safe in new light and new life,—a new harmony yet To be run, and continued, and ended—who knows?—or endure! The man taught enough, by life's dream, of the rest to make sure; By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning intensified bliss, And the next world's reward and repose, by the struggles in this.

Browning points us unerringly to a gospel by which to judge this tragic tale. We move through this world in a darkness where our minds stumble; we are perplexed on every hand; we cannot grasp and control half the powers that lurk without us or within; and our only earthly comforter is love. On that we fling our faith as a reflection of God Himself, however much our intellect gropes amid dark problems. We trust where we cannot trace.

“Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst Thou—so wilt Thou!” God is not less good than those brave men of Gilead who went by night, for love's sake, on their dangerous exploit to Bethshan. “’Tis our flesh that we seek in the Godhead!” Our God is revealed to us when we see Him as a man. And seeing Him thus, knowing that the love which makes for gladness and safety among us in this ill-understood world is His Spirit in us, we may hope for issue from our weakness, our madness and our despair. It is a tragic world, and we cannot pretend to an understanding of all its grim happenings. Only we do see operating within it a marvellously ameliorating and reconciling power of love which again and again brings light upon its darkness and healing upon its sores; and so makes it possible for us to trust in an ultimate triumph of

love and an ultimate explanation of all things in its light which we shall awake to and be satisfied. In the midst of our bewilderments and woes we come upon the marvel of this blessed power, and we sit stilled and pacified before it, as the madman of Gadara sat before Christ, clothed and in his right mind. And we believe that here we face a power that is sovran, and will prove itself sovran at last against all our doubts. Blinded with tears, the world shall yet move out of its tribulation to meet Him who wipes all tears from our eyes ; and looking back on its strange earth-journeying shall see that all things have mysteriously worked together for good. "Blind from the prison-house, maimed from the battle, or mad from the tombs, their souls shall surely yet sit, astonished, at His feet who giveth peace."

XVII

THE DOWNFALL OF
THE GIANT-KILLER

And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man : and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die, because he hath no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.

II. SAMUEL xii. 6-7.

XVII

THE DOWNFALL OF THE GIANT-KILLER

KING DAVID had every quality that makes a man admirable to his acquaintances and an idol to the crowd. He had strength, beauty, talents, courage, address, chivalry, kindliness. He was as unassuming as he was audacious. And he had a signal genius for friendship, and the power to arouse impassioned loyalty. He was the Admirable Crichton of his age—warrior, bard and courtier in one : undeniably a most redoubtable, gifted and charming personality—a darling of the gods.

In the memoirs of David's court in II. Samuel we have what is held to be one of the earliest pieces of historical narrative in the Old Testament, written probably at no long period after the death of the hero it celebrates. But as regards some of the earlier passages of the life of David recorded in I. Samuel there is less certainty, and the stories show the quality of folk-tale rather than of sober chronicle. Two contradictory accounts, for example, are rather clumsily woven together, concerning the circumstances of his first introduction to Saul. In the one—the far more probable one—he is already established at the royal court as Saul's musician and armour-bearer at the time of the great battle with the Philistines ; in the other he comes upon the scene of battle as a raw youth straight from his father's farm. Perhaps it was his resort to a shepherd's sling as weapon—an act so unusual in a trained soldier—that misled the popular memory, and gave rise to the second version of the story. But there is a further point in which

popular tradition has misled us. We need not doubt for a moment that David killed a giant, but he never killed Goliath of Gath. There is a verse in II. Samuel xxi. where the truth leaks out that Goliath of Gath, the staff of whose spear was like a weaver's beam, was slain by one Elhanan. The giant whom David slew with his sling and stone was apparently nameless. But it is too awkward to go on telling a yarn of this sort without giving a name to its characters, and so the name of poor Elhanan's giant was bagged on behalf of David. It was quite too bad. But it is the way of the world : to him that hath shall be given. Elhanan was an obscure hero ; and so the popular verdict made no scruple about stripping him of his medals and pinning them on to the breast of David. True, the later chronicler endeavours to make amends in a back-handed way by suggesting that it was Goliath's brother that Elhanan slew. But this is poor justice ! We must restore the good man to his rights. Why should the dim glories of our forgotten Elhanans be submerged and made tributary to the shining glories of our unforgotten Davids ? Yet let Elhanan rest in peace. He is not devoid of honour. His name is but a variant of Johanan, otherwise John or Jack ; and all our nurseries know that it was Jack who was the Giant-killer.

David's exploit with the nameless giant was anyhow a mighty one. And we may be sure that if old Elhanan looks upon us from the shades, he has enough of the hero in him to bear no grudge to David for stealing his particular giant ; and has, no doubt, again and again generously enjoyed the brave excitement of all youngsters who from age to age have thrilled to hear that whop of the smooth stone as it caught the arrogant old Philistine between the eyebrows and felled him like a chopped oak.

Folk-tale has played its part, then, in touching up our history of David. But the outline of sound tradition is perfectly clear. He came as a young man to Saul's court,

and soothed the old king's madness by his music and song, for which he won unrivalled fame in Israel. By a deed of astonishing prowess in single-handed duel with a huge Philistine he won national fame as a warrior, and rapidly advanced to the headship of the army. Saul quarrelled with him, and he was forced into outlawry, in which state he experienced many thrilling adventures, and brought off many a daring coup, quite in the manner of Rob Roy—all the while maintaining a respectful deference to Saul himself, and holding the unbounded affection of the greater part of the populace. Despite his banishment, he remained the second most powerful man in the kingdom; and at Saul's death all southern Israel rallied at once to him and placed him on the throne. At first Abner, Saul's captain, set up Ishbosheth as a rival king in the north; but this weakling quarrelled with Abner, who deserted to David and was treacherously slain by Joab. Ishbosheth himself was murdered soon afterwards, and David was left in undisputed supremacy.

It is a very romantic story. And David's magnanimity stands out again and again. There are two versions of the tale as to how he spared Saul's life when he had the latter in his power, and we cannot be sure, therefore, of the exact incident. But the tenor of the tale, in whichever form we take it, is true to what we know of David elsewhere—in the later episodes, for example, of the murders of Abner and Ishbosheth. In the former case David could not afford to exact vengeance on the formidable Joab, but he openly expresses his indignant horror, and does the appropriate funeral honours to Abner's corpse, even to the composing of a dirge. In the case of Ishbosheth he has the murderers executed. These are the actions of a man of honour and loyalty. So is his slaying of the messenger who came trying to curry favour out of the news of Saul's death—rough justice though that was; so is the lament in which he mourns for Saul, the honest grief of which wails down

the ages ; so is that pathetic inquiry of his, as soon as he is seated on the throne, as to whether there is any yet left of the house of Saul that he may show the kindness of God unto him ; and his treatment of Mephibosheth, the lame son of Jonathan, whom he pensioned and took to live in his own court.

We need in justice to recall these very noble traits in the character of David, and to realize his essential honour and gentlemanliness, if we are to appreciate aright the horrible fall and dislocation of his character that was brought about by his lust for Bathsheba. David had the instincts of a man of honour and piety. He was no Borgia. And the horror of this incident of squalid intrigue and murder lies in the fact that so honourable and decent a man as David should be flung by a sudden wave of lust into so damnable a crime.

The sex-morality of that day, with its plurality of wives and concubines, gave free rein to a man's desires. There was little training in self-restraint. But there was order, legality, and a certain mutual regard in these relationships. David was clearly a man of pretty inflammable temperament ; no thought of ascetic restraint ever entered his head ; and, no doubt, in his character of popular hero, plenty of women were ready to fling themselves at him. But he was fair-minded and generous in the ordinary dispositions of his life, and in his normal senses he would have shrunk from that accursed treachery against Uriah. But Cupid goes blindfold. In the hot fit of passion even a noble nature will deceive itself with every sort of worthless excuse and subterfuge, unless it has been sternly disciplined in self-control. There came a relaxed and indolent hour on his palace roof one summer afternoon when an unexpected vision of bodily beauty gave play to the lust of his eyes. David lingered and gloated over it, not with the wholesome admiration of a continent and busy mind, but with the itch of desire that invades an empty, idle moment

when the will is slack and the conscience drowsy. He was in the reckless grip of lust before he knew it ; and alas ! he had a king's power of self-indulgence. Fulfilment was so easy. Probably most women would have counted his desire of them an honour. Anyhow, Bathsheba was not the woman to resist him. She had nothing of the heroic chastity which is attributed to the Shulamite in that rapturous love drama, the Song of Songs. So the sin began, and engendered further sin : " the crime of lust became the crime of malice," as is its wont. And David the magnanimous, David the splendid, dauntless and forgiving prince, became the base adulterer, the crafty, mean intriguer, the cold murderer of a brave and loyal lieutenant.

It is a dastardly tale, leaving a huge, indelible blot upon an otherwise noble life. But most men reflecting on it will say : " There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Like a toad within a stone
Seated while Time crumbles on ;
Which sits there since the earth was curs'd
For Man's transgression at the first ;
Which, living through all centuries,
Not once has seen the sun arise ;
Whose life, to its cold circle charmed,
The earth's whole summers have not warmed ;
Which always—witherso the stone
Be flung—sits there, deaf, blind, alone ;—
Aye, and shall not be driven out
Till that which shuts him round about
Break at the very Master's stroke,
And the dust thereof vanish as smoke,
And the seed of Man vanish as dust :—
Even so within this world is Lust.

That magnificent passage from Rossetti's *Jenny* chills and sobers us all. We know how true is his figure of the loathsome toad lurking hidden within us. And it is wholesome for us to be reminded of it in such sombre and doomful words. But there is a gospel which Rossetti does not utter. He does not discriminate between the ineradicable physical desire, God-given in every man, and the uncontrolled

fling of it upon selfish ends which turns it into sinful lust, toad-like and abominable. Desire remains eternal ; but the Master's stroke may surely liberate it into wholesome sunshine without waiting for the pulverizing blow of death. It is a passion of tremendous power, likely to take the bit in its teeth and run away with us into ruinous disaster. But it is not damnable in itself. It becomes so only when we let it dethrone the reason and good-will in us, and so dwarf us beneath our proper stature of responsible manhood. The wise old Kirstie in *Weir of Hermiston* sees the grace of God in it, even while she dreads, and pleads against, a thoughtless submission to the torrent of its power : " Ay, Mr. Erchie, I ken the way o' it—fine do I ken the way—how the grace o' God takes them, like Paul of Tarsus, when they think it least, and drives the pair o' them into a land which is like a dream, and the world and the folks in 't are nae mair than clouds to the puir lassie, and heaven nae mair than windle-straes, if she can but plesure him ! " . . . " Kirstie," said Archie hoarsely, " you have misjudged me sorely. I have always thought of her, I would not harm her for the universe, my woman ! " " Eh, lad, and that's easy sayin'," cried Kirstie, " but it's nane sae easy doin' ! Man, do ye no comprehend that it's God's wull we should be blendit and glamoured, and have nae command over our ain members at a time like that ? My bairn, think o' the puir lass ! Have pity upon her, Erchie ! And O, be wise for twa ! "

Yes, God's Will is in the natural passion, but it is in the moral forethought, too, which governs the passion to just and wholesome ends. Natural desire is of God and not of the devil, and we cannot annul it. If, Manichee-like, we look upon it as of the devil, and try to extirpate or suppress it, we do but drive it into obscure corners of our nature, whence it works its subtle derangements upon us. But if we see it as a power of God in us we can guide and liberate it into spiritual and open-hearted affections, making it a

sacrament of life to our salvation. We mortify its base growths only by vivifying its noble growths. We cast out lust by love alone. A morality of mere denial and suppression can never save us in this matter. It is by the positive release and expansion of desire into channels of delicate and unselfish affection that lust is to be extirpated. We need to catch the glowing delights of love in the loyal wedding of a mate ; or, diffusedly, in the unselfish service of mankind, in friendship, in happy play with children, in all the eager pleasures of an alert imagination. Only when such delights are fully ours, and we are revelling in them, will lust appear to us the squalid and nasty perversion of all jolly desire that it really is.

Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,
 But Lust's effect is tempest after sun ;
 Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,
 Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done ;
 Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies ;
 Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies.

But no abstract statement of the truth—not even from Shakespeare's lips—will convince us, unless we are feeling and enjoying the positive delights of a desire that has been lifted on to spiritual levels. Hence the enormous need of an environment which shall engage us all, and especially the young, with idealistic pursuits toward health, beauty and philanthropy. All too soon in youth we are given this heady steed of sexual passion to ride, and we are likely to be tumbled a good deal before we get the mastery. Success is no doubt furthered by the wholesome outlet of our energies, physical, imaginative, affectional—in sport and art and friendship. But we need more than this for security. We need the glowing admiration and awe of a great faith. For at best there will be an element of sheer battle now and then, of slaying and mortification ; and we are armoured for those fights only by a consuming love of God. But the more we vivify desire in generous and innocent ways, the

less room will there be for temptation, the less need for pruning and mortifying its cancerous growths.

Love is a spiritual coupling of two souls,
 So much more excellent as it least relates
 Unto the body ; circular, eternal ;
 Not feign'd, or made, but born : and then, so precious,
 As nought can value it but itself ; so free,
 As nothing can command it but itself. . . .
 True love hath no unworthy thought, no light
 Loose unbecoming appetite, or strain ;
 But fixed, constant, pure, immutable. . . .
 The end of love is to have two made one
 In will, and in affection, that the minds
 Be first inoculated, not the bodies. . . .
 Nor do they trespass within bounds of pardon
 That giving way and license to their love,
 Divest him of his noblest ornaments,
 Which are his modesty and shamefacedness.

Ben Jonson is thankworthy, like all the nobler poets, for keeping this positive ideal of pure love before our eyes, and filling our hearts with the sense of its enchantment. Flesh is a sweet thing. Bodily beauty is adorable. And the true poets have no qualms in making us realize the dearness of it. They summon us to a frank and dancing world. And yet they make us see that all the glory and glamour of sense rots and withers unless it is held in continent dignity and social honour. We owe a heavy debt to all those who help us toward a positive and vital ethic of sex. Our society is still too stuffy, too constrained, too prudish. Better, far better, this than a blowsy and indelicate society. But the world of the future will be safer with less timidity. We shall be so full of continent health that Bathsheba will be able to take her bath without Tom Pry swelling with insubordinate lust in consequence. Some day we shall learn how frankly to admire without insult and to enjoy without grossness. A strong positive current of chaste delight will hold back the tides of selfish lust where all mere negative barriers of prudery have failed. We grow toward sanity. And there is a nobler race yet to be.

But meanwhile we are in a world of sore strain and temptation, where lust continually riots, and brings its dingy tragedies before us day by day. Great ones succumb to it. Here is a giant which even the giant-killers fail to slay. It destroys men's homes. It drags established honours through the mire. It saps the foundations of whole kingdoms. Sad, irrevocable ruin follows in its wake. How pathetic are the closing passages in David's life, which began amid such brilliance! Fratricidal war and undutiful rebellion bring the old king with sorrow to the grave. We see him like Lear, "a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man," going in flight from Jerusalem with the curses of Shimei ringing in his ears. For his own example in lust and murder had been followed up by lesser men, and chaos threatened the land; just as Guinevere's sin with Lancelot was followed by the sin of Tristram and Isolt; and others "drawing foul example from fair names, sinn'd also," till the whole fair structure of King Arthur's dream went toppling down to ruin.

David was brought to penitence, indeed. We see him a broken, humbled man, ready to forgive all others because he cannot forgive himself. A very noble dignity shines out in his penitent old age. Weakened now, and weary, and broken-hearted, he is so forbearing, so patient and devout, that we love him in spite of his great crime. We feel that Uriah himself would pity and forgive that chastened spirit; and we trust that somewhere in God's world that forgiveness has been asked and granted. But there are sins which can never be remedied within the limits of this earthly life. No penitence of David's could bring back Uriah from the grave. Penitence has a blessed, ameliorating force in this crime-burdened world; but it does not enable us to cry quits to an irrevocable deed of evil. We are apt to estimate the cost of our amends too cheaply. Dick Shelton in the *Black Arrow* had stolen and wrecked the ship of the old skipper Arblaster, and killed some of his

men into the bargain. He is really sorry ; and later on, when he is able to save the old skipper's life, he eagerly does so in the fond hope that such an act will cancel out the old wrong completely. But Arblaster will not shake hands : "Nay, let be. Y' have played the devil with me, and let that content you." And poor Dick "for the first time began to understand the desperate game that we play in life, and how a thing once done is not to be changed or remedied by any penitence." That hard statement goes a bit beyond the truth, but it errs on the safe side. Forgiveness is not easy to win, and demands a deeper penitence than most of us expect. But forgiveness is to be won, and forgiveness means that a thing once done is changed : there is a transmutation of all its natural effects. There is positive gain brought out of loss. There is "for evil, so much good more." And such forgiveness is inseparable from penitence, and develops precisely according to the measure of penitence. Obviously, if we kill a man we cannot win his forgiveness in this world, and so the transformation of the wrong cannot be complete however deep our repentance. For it takes two to establish a forgiveness, the wronger and the wronged. But though there are many sins whose evil results cannot be wholly transmuted in this life, every step in penitence helps forward that transmutation. And we see enough of the miracle of cancelled wrong, even within the narrow limits of our human survey, to give us ground for faith that the grace of God is strong enough to bring, at last, all things to good issue. We believe in the forgiveness of sins.

But sin costs very dear, and its effects are very stubborn to remove. Be sure our sins will find us out. And many a man will find here no scope for his repentance, though he seek for it with tears. Some such thought as this seems to underlie the message of the prophet Nathan. He allows that David's penitence must mitigate to some degree the consequences of his sin, but the doom of it cannot be wholly

annulled. The prophet is represented as foreseeing such doom in the death of the child born from the adulterous union. The child did die, as undesired children born in shame and fear are most apt to do. But David could make amends in some measure, and labour to straighten out the sorry tangle as far as might be. And for the sake of his repentant efforts he should not be utterly crushed into ruin and irrevocable despair.

The famous Fifty-first Psalm was assuredly not written by David, but it was not inappropriate for a later age to attribute it to him. For he was certainly a man sincere in his repentance, and he, for one, learnt the good news : " A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou shalt not despise " ; he could even lay hold upon the hope that " Thou shalt wash me and I shall be whiter than snow." There is an earlier psalm, the thirty-second, which some Biblical scholars have claimed with better reason to be, possibly, a composition of David's. It strikes a note of such cheerful escape from the sense of guilt that I find it hard myself to imagine David writing it. It is too exultant in its realization of a forgiveness fully demonstrated. But, whoever its author, it does very nobly proclaim the gladness of confession, the relief of unloading a deadly secret, and, by thus opening the road to amendment, winning back the foundations of self-respect. " Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, in whose spirit is no self-deceiving. While I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my complaining all the day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me. I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord ; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." Something of that blessedness David no doubt felt, even though he did not arrive, perhaps, at so complacent a sense that all was well as the psalmist expresses. He did acknowledge his sin ; and such confession is the beginning of all happy absolution.

Well, here is the story of a good man's crime in an hour when he was blinded by lust. It is easy to assume righteous indignation, and pour out a sneering scorn upon those who speak of David as "a man after God's own heart." He might well be called so in his hour of promise, aye, and in his hour of remorse. It were better for us to remember our Lord's satiric thrust about the mote and the beam, lest we should be found the objects of some later Nathan's parable, and should stagger before the accusing finger and the thundering word, "Thou art the man !"

XVIII

THE RIVAL ALTARS

And Elijah came unto the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions ? if the Lord be God, follow him : but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. . . . Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces : and they said, The Lord, he is the God ; the Lord, he is the God.

I. KINGS xviii. 21 ; 38, 39.

XVIII

THE RIVAL ALTARS

THE death of the great king Solomon is reckoned with a fair measure of certainty to have taken place about the year 930 B.C. Some fifty years after that date, when Solomon's empire had long since been broken up, and two beggarly little kingdoms in Palestine were all that remained of it, a man named Ahab ascended the throne of northern Israel. He was a brave soldier and an intelligent ruler, bent upon strengthening his kingdom against the encroachments of the Syrians from Damascus. To this end he leagued himself with his neighbour, the king of Judah, fought successfully to maintain a suzerainty over Moab, and set up a new alliance by taking to wife the daughter of Ethbaal, King of Tyre.

To a man of the world all this would seem sound policy. But the last step had its grave moral dangers. An inter-racial marriage would imply, in those days, a recognition of the gods of each race side by side. Ahab had no objection to this. He had no intention of breaking from Israel's traditional worship or persecuting its devotees. On the contrary, it is pointed out that he gave distinct recognition to the national faith in the names he chose for his children. But he was not a man of strong conscientiousness. And to him it seemed a trivial, harmless matter to give recognition to his wife's religion, and build temples to Melcart, the Tyrian Baal, alongside the temples of Yahweh. In his eyes, as an unscrupulous man of the world, it was far more important to secure a political alliance with Tyre than to

avoid the moral risk of introducing among his people a sensual nature-worship quite antipathetic to the austere moral character of the old Israelite faith in Yahweh.

So the foreign marriage was contracted, and Jezebel took up her residence in Ahab's court at Samaria, or in the summer palace at Jezreel. She was a proud, strong-minded woman who exerted all her influence firmly to establish the Baal-worship in her new home; and the easy-going Ahab was entirely willing to let her have her way. But the new queen, with her retinue of foreign priests, was not popular. And to one man at least in Ahab's kingdom this introduction of an alien worship was an act of stark blasphemy against the Lord.

For in the charming hill-country of Gilead, with its great sheep-walks, and its narrow gorges musical with mountain torrents, there was living Elijah—the primate among the great roll of Hebrew prophets. He was a wild, strange figure, a shaggy-red highlander, with cloak or striped blanket of camel's hair, tied by a skin girdle, appearing here and there out of his solitude with startling suddenness—a very Dervish of the wilderness. An athletic man of iron physique, he could race a chariot across country. No city-dweller he, nor writer of books, like the prophets of a century later from Amos onwards. But he was a man of most passionate moral reflection, for whom—as his name implied—Yahweh, the Lord of Righteousness, was God, and He alone. And that intense conviction marks him as the father of the long line of prophets who made the religion of old Israel the foundation of the religion of all mankind.

The biography of this redoubtable man, fragments of which are embedded in the Book of Kings, was written perhaps about the end of the ninth century B.C., not so very long after his death. But legend had already been at work, and the facts of his life-story are coloured with prodigy to a lavish degree.

He appears to us with the utmost abruptness, announcing

to King Ahab the approach of a drought : "There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." We have independent evidence of a drought that overtook Palestine and Phœnicia during Ahab's reign in the history of Menander of Ephesus, quoted by Josephus. According to Menander it lasted a twelvemonth. Our Old Testament author implies a rather longer period, but not three years, as is often supposed. The mention of rain coming again "in the third year" implies no more than that a full twelvemonth and a bit more had intervened—a period, probably, from the "latter rains" of one spring to the "former rains" of the next autumn but one. In other words, one exceptionally dry year had gone by, during which both the customary rainy seasons had failed. The summer months in Palestine are normally quite rainless, and the country depends for its moisture on the dew and occasional night mists. In our story even these are said to fail, as well as the autumn and spring rains.

During this drought, which Elijah, by a bit of acute meteorological judgment or maybe by some touch of second sight, had foretold, he betook himself to the brook Cherith—an unknown site, probably in his native country of Gilead. And here, we are told, he was fed from day to day by ravens. In the story of Gideon we read of two Arab princes named Oreb and Zeeb, the Raven and the Wolf; hence it has been argued that the ravens that fed Elijah were the wandering Arabs near whom he pitched his hermitage. Or, again, it is suggested that the word "oreb" may be a mistake for "Arab." This rationalization gives a plausible origin for our story. But doubtless the chronicler was in good faith recording a miraculous tradition as it had come down to him, and he would not have been interested in the episode if he had not supposed it to be supernatural in character.

However, the brook Cherith dries up after a while, and Elijah is driven to Zarephath in Phœnicia. He is still in the famine area, and still needs to be miraculously

sustained. So we have the graceful story of the poor, kindly widow who, as a reward for her hospitality to the prophet, finds her barrel of meal and her cruse of oil never failing through all the bitter months of drought. But this is an unaccountable story quite apart from the miracle. The kind widow of Zarephath, one must suppose, was a worshipper of the false Tyrian Baal, whose advent into Israel was, in Elijah's view, the cause of the merciless drought that had fallen on the country. Why should Elijah take refuge in the very district whose deity was his pet aversion : sent there, too, by the promptings of his own God ? It seems impossible to disentangle the actual facts and motives of the story. Some would suggest that we have here a hint of Elijah's real religious standpoint. The Baal might properly be worshipped in his own land ; but Israel was not his land. He was an intruder there, usurping the rights of Yahweh. Every god to his own country, and no trespassing ! Such a religious point of view was quite customary before a true monotheism began to prevail in men's minds. And yet Elijah himself openly worships the God of Israel in this foreign town, and apparently converts his hostess to the same worship. And certainly when we meet him next in the great scene on Carmel he speaks with utter contempt of the rival god, not in the language of a man who recognizes other gods than Yahweh, each in his own domain. Can he have gone to Zarephath to inform himself at first hand of the real character of this Baal worship, and to return at length all the more furiously determined to challenge the priests of this immoral cult ? That was, at least, the effect of his sojourn. On Carmel he speaks as the pure monotheist for whom there is but one true God in the universe, and all other deities are but figments of human imagination.

At length the second autumn is approaching, and the word of the Lord comes to Elijah, saying, " Go, show thyself unto Ahab ; and I will send rain upon the earth." So he

travels southward and, on drawing near Samaria, finds Obadiah, the king's steward, anxiously scouring the country for any bit of pasturage still remaining, that he may bring back a promise of fodder for the royal stables. Obadiah is a good friend to Elijah, and a loyal supporter of the true faith. Already he has risked his life to save those of a school of prophets whom Jezebel had sought to massacre. Evidently, then, the religious feud had reached a crisis in Elijah's absence, and the news of this may have been the real cause of his return to make his daring challenge and bring things once and for all to a settlement.

Obadiah is persuaded to announce Elijah's return to Ahab, and king and prophet confront each other again. One would like to know more of their interview. But we are told only of its upshot, which seems to have been that Eli won permission from Ahab to rebuild the neglected altar of Yahweh on Carmel, so that the two faiths might contend there side by side until the true God showed forth his power in evident blessing.

Carmel was a fair and appropriate arena for such a contest of faiths, for it was sacred both to the Jew and to the Phœnician, and had belonged to them in turn at different periods. It had been a sanctuary from time immemorial—a natural "high-place" for worship, being the one great headland that breaks the flat monotony of the coastline; and as its name of "the Garden" implies, it was flanked with rich vegetation, being the first spot in the country to catch the rains from westward.

The story of this battle of faiths is dramatized with superb force by the old historian. He represents it as a deliberately arranged duel in the presence of the whole populace, gathered there on the sacred hill to watch the issue. Each party was to prepare a sacrifice and "the God that answereth by fire, let him be God." All day long under the sweltering sun the priests of Baal cry upon their god, gashing their bodies in frenzy as the hours wear on and no answer comes,

while Elijah taunts them with contemptuous mockery. With the drawing in of the evening there is a silence of despairing failure at Baal's altar, while Elijah steps forward to his task, repairs the altar of the Lord that had fallen to decay, loads it with his sacrifice, and drenches it with water (whence procured in this appalling drought we are not told : but there would be open springs on Carmel, if anywhere) ; and then he falls to prayer. There is a hush of awe upon the scene as Elijah prays, in vivid contrast with the noisy bellowings of his opponents. The quietness of a great trust creeps over the story. Then with a piercing flash the lightning falls ; the altar is aflame with fire ; not only the sacrifice, but the very stones and dust are consumed ; and forthwith the hill-side echoes with a great shout, "Yahweh, he is the God ; Yahweh, he is the God !"

It is a tremendous scene—so magnificently written that no critical analysis can rob it of its impressive awe for all future time. But every one must recognize that without question we are dealing here with legend ; and the curious intellect is eager to probe it and uncover its factual basis. And it is not difficult to make a shrewd guess at the possible facts underlying this noble romance.

Carmel was a double sanctuary : on its summit there had been, in use or disuse for ages past, altars both to Yahweh and the Tyrian Baal. For Carmel stood practically at the boundary of the two kingdoms, and its ownership had often been in dispute. If, amid Jezebel's innovations, the altar of Yahweh had fallen into disuse and ruin, Elijah could have made no more significant challenge than to claim the right to rebuild it and resume the sacrifices there. This would not necessarily have taken place amid a huge concourse of people summoned for the purpose, though it was doubtless done openly, and must have attracted much attention ; and the king himself may have been persuaded to patronize the renewed sacrifices with his presence. We may presume that the two rival cults were thus being carried

on side by side, while Elijah waited and prayed for the promised rain. At last the clouds gather over the sea ; the storm rolls up ; and a flash of lightning strikes down on Elijah's altar. As may be seen from the story in *II. Chronicles vii.*, where the altar in Solomon's new temple is said to have been similarly struck by fire from heaven, and from other parallel tales, this fall of lightning was always thought of as a certain sign of divine acceptance and consecration. If such an event happened, therefore, all the necessary elements were at once to hand for writing up the whole story in the form in which we have it in our Bibles. The actual sequence of facts may be presumed to have been as follows : (1) a year of drought, for which Elijah in his public preaching throws the blame upon Ahab's introduction of a foreign cult ; (2) the prophet is driven into hiding by Jezebel's anger and her increasingly dangerous influence ; (3) after some months he returns and boldly claims to reinstate the Lord's altar on Carmel, where the opposing altar of the Baal was now flourishing ; (4) shortly afterwards the drought breaks up with a terrific storm, during which Elijah's altar is struck by lightning ; (5) this remarkable incident coinciding with the break up of the drought is taken as an evident sign of the power of Yahweh ; the compromising populace suddenly swings over to Elijah's side, and a furious massacre of the priests of Baal takes place in consequence. It was easy for such a sequence of events quickly to have developed in the popular imagination into the one set day of challenge between Elijah and the Phœnician priests, with the lightning falling from heaven as a direct answer to his prayer ; while his anxious expectation of the rain-cloud, which must have preceded the lightning flash, is recorded as an epilogue to impress the lesson that the divine blessing of the rain came as a reward for the re-establishment of the true faith.

In such way we may read between the lines of the Bible narrative and detect there a genuine history of Elijah's

courageous witness on behalf of his God. His re-erection of the Lord's altar was a bold challenge to the innovating religion ; and if fortunate accident helped to decide the issue in his favour, nevertheless it was his moral passion and energy which brought to the point of decision the question as to whether Israel could safely tolerate this foreign cult. Elijah saw that the two faiths were mutually exclusive ; and he was right.

For what was this Baal worship ? Baal is a generic name for all the local deities of old Canaan. Various districts had each its own distinct Baal. But they were all alike in essential idea. The Baal was always a nature-deity, the lord of the soil ; or, more accurately, the lord of the waters—the streams and springs—that fertilized the soil of any particular stretch of country. He was the fertilizing agent which made a favoured valley or stretch of moorland richer in its yield than other parts. He was the source, then, of corn and wine and oil. And hence, too, the cause of fruitfulness in cattle and in men. He was the lord of all reproductive life. And the common consequence of such modes of thought was that all these Baal cults were full of sensual observances. Their worship sanctioned and required the sacrifice of chastity. Prostitution and even worse vices were associated with a man's religious duties. And more than that : the god who brought offspring must needs be honoured with the first-fruits thereof, not only of corn and cattle, but of humankind. And so the cruel devilry of child-sacrifice was a common feature in these nature-religions. Now the Israelites, as we know from so many Bible references, had been constantly in danger of sinking back into these old Canaanitish rites, which were maintained among all their neighbours. But the ringing appeal of the faith of Yahweh was toward a moral worship, the worship of a God who spoke in conscience, and not in mere bodily instinct, a God who stood for character and spiritual power, and demanded from men the rational

worship of moral effort as against the base superstition of magic rites of fertility. "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

Probably the Baal worship had never been thoroughly banished from Israel, and had lingered side by side with the nobler spiritual worship of the Lord. But the arrival of Jezebel and her swarms of foreign priests had brought matters to a crisis. One or other faith must definitely go under. The attempt to mingle them would inevitably mean that the higher and more exacting religion would be swamped. It was Elijah's unforgettable distinction that he realized this, and with intense moral energy gave battle to the insidious encroachments of the heathen cult. He would tolerate no compromise. "How long halt ye between two opinions?"—that was undoubtedly the burden of his preaching. The time had come for Israel to reach a final decision.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood,
For the good or evil side.

Israel's hour of crisis had now struck ; and Elijah preached for a decision, as the great evangelists, burdened with a horror of sin, have always done. He preached as Savonarola or Wesley preached, and his burning earnestness won the decision he wanted : the faith in a God of Righteousness was preserved. It was not an absolute and final victory : it never is. The danger returned again and again. But Elijah had lit a torch in Israel which could never be put out. And from his day onward—for the next four hundred years in almost constant sequence, and then perhaps with less frequency and power, but never wholly dying away until its final consummation in that John of the Desert who heralded the Christ—the voice of exalted prophecy was never lost to Israel ; and the faith in a God of Righteousness became an indelible conviction, ultimately spreading from

Israel with the rise of Christendom, and living still to win the world.

In this agelong religious advance the strange, wild figure of Elijah must always bear an honoured place. It was no fanatic and crotchety squabble about rival rituals in which he fought, but a struggle of world-wide import between a concept of deity based on the wonder of natural fertility and bodily instinct, and a concept of deity based on the deeper wonder of the moral sense. God is what ? That is the eternal question. And Elijah won his battle with the answer : God is the Eternal that loveth righteousness.

Because of that historic struggle, recorded with such dramatic splendour in the Book of Kings, we look back to Carmel almost as to a second Sinai. On Sinai was this religion of the Lord of Righteousness first formally promulgated as the national faith, and established in code and covenant through the genius of Moses ; on Carmel it was rescued from destruction and born anew. Moses initiated the movement which built a notable nation out of a herd of slaves by giving them a faith and welding them into a church—a nation whose power culminated in the golden days of David and Solomon. Elijah initiated the movement which resurrected the church from the ruins of the nation, preserving through weal and woe a faithful, though often martyred, people, from among whom at last there sprang up the new world of Christendom. It was meet that in our Lord's transfigurement on Hermon the spirits of Moses and Elijah should commune with Him. The world was at that hour once again at the cross-roads ; and He who was to fix its future line of development drank inspiration from the two great forerunners who had been its guides at the most decisive turning-points in the past. In the old dispensation no figures stand out with a grandeur comparable to that which invests Moses and Elijah as they are figured by the wondering imagination of after ages. They are the moral Titans of old Israel—the men who affirmed and reaffirmed in the midst of her the Everlasting Yea.

XIX

A STILL SMALL VOICE

And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and break in pieces the rocks before the Lord ; but the Lord was not in the wind : and after the wind an earthquake ; but the Lord was not in the earthquake ; and after the earthquake a fire ; but the Lord was not in the fire : and after the fire a still small voice.

I. KINGS xix. 11, 12.

XIX

A STILL SMALL VOICE

THERE is a fine imaginative passage in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* where he pictures Teufelsdröckh standing one summer midnight on the cliffs of the North Cape, gazing out across the Polar Sea where the midnight sun hangs low and hazy. He is utterly alone : no living thing is about him ; only " the granite cliffs ruddy-tinged, and the peaceable gurgle of that slow-heaving Polar Ocean." " In such moments," he says, " solitude is invaluable, for who would speak or be looked on, when behind him lies all Europe and Africa, fast asleep, except the watchmen ; and before him the silent Immensity, and Palace of the Eternal, whereof our Sun is but a porch-lamp ? "

Beside that picture of Teufelsdröckh at the North Cape we may put this other picture of uttermost solitude—Elijah alone in the mountain fastnesses of Sinai. Here, too, were granite cliffs ruddy-tinged, more sublime in height by far, and more shuddering in their precipitous descents, than the cliffs of Norway ; and at their roots the coral-strewn beaches of the tropical sea. Sinai stands up like the centre-piece of the earth, at the junction of three continents ; its inviolability guarded by great deserts ; a sanctuary of naked rock and air, the home of an intense silence. And Elijah is there alone, crouched at a cave entry—one man in awful solitude waiting upon God ; while " the million-peopled cities vast " of the habitable earth lie far beneath and far beyond the desert horizons, dwarfed to mere human

ant-hills in the imagination of this solitary watcher on the peaks.

Elijah's dramatic victory over the prophets of Baal, though its real effects were mighty and permanent, appeared for the moment quite abortive. It had roused the queen to vigorous counter-action, and Elijah had to flee for his life. He had crossed into Judah, and pressed southward to the old limit of the land at Beersheba, where he had left his servant, and plunged alone into the desert. For the moment he seemed like a broken man, eager to be done with this toilsome and desperate world: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." It is the voice of a man unnerved and utterly weary. The immense spiritual excitement of his struggle for the true faith had left him prostrate. He lies down under a bush of broom in some desert wady, as the Arabs are wont to do for a midday rest—this bush affording often the only shade available. And there he sleeps, perhaps hoping, or even intending, to lie there till death gave him his release. But he is awakened. An angel touched him, and bade him rise and eat, offering him bread and water. Some passing wanderer, maybe, thus found him and succoured him; for the word "angel" has a very loose connotation, and may refer to anyone or anything that appears to bring divine help. How long he had lain there we are not told—perhaps for days. For the story seems to imply that Elijah was really seeking suicide. He was probably found fainting and half-dead by this kindly traveller, who, reviving him with food and tendance, made a new man of him again, and so proved himself veritably an angel of God—the means through which Elijah's suicidal despair was banished and a new sense of providential calling given to him. It could not be by accident that the stranger had thus found him lying like a corpse in the desert solitude. God's hand was in the event. This man was God's messenger, telling him, more clearly than words could tell, that

it was not God's Will for him yet to die. He was still needed. There was still work to be done. The cause was not lost. He had not thought to awake again to this world's interests and duties. But God had intervened and sent His messenger to revive him. A clearer evidence of the Divine Will could not be forthcoming, and Elijah accepts it as such. If ever afterwards he was asked where this unlooked-for stranger came from, he could but say with deep conviction : " God sent him ; he was God's angel to me ; that is all I know."

So Elijah is awake again with the world about him, and the tide of his own energy returning as sleep and food work their beneficent miracles in his body. But what is he to do ? That is by no means clear. He is ready to accept God's orders, but he must first find out what these are. He must wait for guidance. And where would he be most likely to get it ? He was only a few days' journey—" forty days " is merely a routine phrase here—from Sinai, the holiest of holy spots, the very sanctuary of God, where Moses had received of old that Law which was the heart of divine revelation for Israel, when he went up into the thick darkness where God was. What could Elijah do better than follow in Moses' steps, and listen for God's voice on the awful Mount ?

So to Sinai he travels in subdued wonder and eagerness—a man reclaimed from death—and finds lodging in a cave there amid the granite cliffs. So went St. Paul to Arabia after the tumult of his conversion, until, through meditation in that still retreat, God's purpose for him in the future should be made clear. So went our Lord into the wilderness after baptism, before he could feel equipped for public ministry. And so Mohammed retired to his cave in the hills near Mecca till revelation came to him and thrust him forth as God's prophet. So men have always sought in retreat and silence, in meditation and passivity, those deeper and clearer indications of God's Will toward them

that they were hungering after. The instinct for retreat is ineradicable among serious and prayerful folk. We need respite from society with all its incessant practical demands, that the soul may be alone with God, and take stock of itself and its destiny. Only out of the quietness of such withdrawal do men return to society again with new vision and resolve. It is in the silence that we win power for effective duty in the bustling world.

So Elijah dwells awhile in his mountain cave, meditating, looking before and after, waiting till his shadowy, wavering thoughts and purposes are focused into a clear ray of burning conviction, waiting for God's voice.

At first the voice is but a query, bidding him search himself: What doest thou here, Elijah? What motives have drawn you hither? Is it offended pride, or a vague purpose of vengeance? Is it any self-regarding motive at all? Or is it a genuine desire to listen only for God's command, and do only His Will? We are so easily self-deceived. Our selfishness so subtly disguises itself under a cloak of seeming piety or philanthropy. And so the first step in waiting upon God is always self-examination, the uncovering of our innermost heart, the laying ourselves naked before God's eye. His Spirit cannot breathe itself into us while we are preoccupied with motives of our own. The soul must first be swept clear by confession: What doest thou here, Elijah? Examine yourself; review your life; face the facts, facts without and facts within; know yourself; and then, when all subterfuge, all subtle hypocrisy, all self-delusion is done away, the ear may at length be open to hear the voice, not of your own will, but of God's.

And Elijah does thus review his life. He can honestly claim that he has been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts. It was a genuine moral passion that had prompted his crusade. His heart was really sore and burdened at his people's apostasy. It is with no pique of selfish pride,

but with genuine concern for righteousness, that he has struggled against their forsaking of the covenant, their overthrow of the altars, their massacre of the prophets. He can take his stand before God so far with the stubborn confidence of a good intent : I have done this ; was it not well done ? And now where has it carried me ? I, even I only, am left ; and they seek my life to take it away. That is why I am here. That is the honest truth about myself. And what is to be the next step ? I wait for guidance.

There is a rather strikingly close parallel to this in Ruskin's words in *Fors Clavigera*. He also had been carrying on a prophetic crusade, and now, at less than sixty years, seemed old, broken and alone. "What am I," he writes, "to claim leadership, infirm and old ? But I have found no other man in England, none in Europe, ready to receive it. Such as I am, to my own amazement, I stand—so far as I can discern—alone in conviction, in hope, and in resolution, in the wilderness of this modern world." That is the egoism of devotedness—the last infirmity of prophetic minds.

Elijah had told the truth about himself. The man's intent was altogether good. No voice came to upbraid him on that ground. And yet there were truths for him to learn under God's wise and gentle tuition : a lesson of patience and a lesson of hope. He had fought for God, but he had not adequately trusted God. He had tried to be God's champion. Well and honestly done ! But had he not a little exaggerated his importance ? Had he not felt that his failure was God's failure ? Had he not almost usurped God's place, and felt that the battle of God was lost because, forsooth, he himself had had a rebuff ? Was God really quite so helpless without his eager championship ? Had not Elijah, in the very fervour of his self-devotion, overlooked the fact that God had a few others in Israel whom He could also rely upon ? And had he not,

with his impetuous temper, rather missed seeing the secret of God's rule with men—that large, unhasting, secure dominion that will not win its way by angry force, and can afford to meet apparent defeats just because it is so sure of itself? Elijah had swooped like a whirlwind upon the heathen idolaters, and his victory over them was as momentary as the passing of a whirlwind. He had thought to win God's battle in a day, and to win it for ever. Not thus, not thus! The fight is a bigger one than Elijah realized; his own tussle, but one little event in an agelong campaign. And the Lord God, to whom a thousand years are as one day, is a God long-suffering and patient, with the meekness of assured power, of absolute resolve. Elijah had had faith enough for action. Let him now learn the profounder faith needed for patience. He has eagerly fought for God. Let him now learn that God fights His own cause in His own way—demanding our faithful help indeed, but often along lines we should neither have chosen nor conceived for ourselves; and it is ours to trust where we cannot trace.

And this gradual tuition of Elijah's spirit is symbolized in the noble passage that follows Elijah's protesting confession. "The word of the Lord said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and break in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind, an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." The storm that broke over the mountains with its flashing forks of lightning must have vividly reminded Elijah of the recent similar scene on Carmel; and must have quickened to the utmost his expectation of a divine message; for had not God spoken to Moses amid thunders? And was not Yahweh a God who rode upon the thunder-clouds, as the

psalmist said—the thunder itself His voice, symbol of His almighty power as Master and Judge? “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters : the God of glory thundereth : the voice of the Lord breaketh the cedars of Lebanon : He maketh the hills to skip like calves ; the voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire : the voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness.” So the old psalmist pictured the storm sweeping from Lebanon in the north to Kadesh in the south ; hearing in every crash of thunder that made the very hills tremble and lit them with dividing forks of fire, nothing but the voice of the Almighty. Thus Elijah, caught in his cave on Sinai by this terrific storm which interrupts his meditations, conceives that perhaps, in the exaltation of standing amid this battle of the elements, the message he is waiting for will strike upon his ear. He goes to the mouth of the cave and watches the lurid scene—the clouds wrapping him around like battle-smoke, the thunder bursting appallingly about his head, the rocks splintering and crashing into the hidden valleys beneath his feet, the wild hurricane screaming with maniac fury across the bleak summits. Here was every evidence of superhuman power. How gloriously mighty was the God whom he served, the God who wielded these prodigious weapons ! He is roused, expectant, excited. But neither in the shrill voice of the whirling blast, nor in the crack of the fire-bolts, nor in the roar of shattered rock, does any clear message come to him from God. These things do but tell him of God’s awful might, which he knew already ; of God’s wrath in judgment, which his own stern, relentless temper already reflected, perhaps with an improper emphasis. But there was no new vision of faith or duty here. The Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor the fire—not present there in any freshly impressive way which would bring home new truth to Elijah’s soul.

And then, at last, the storm ceases. An unearthly silence falls. The sky sweeps clear, and the drenched

ground lies bare beneath the enormous heavens again. Not a bird is on those heights ; not a stirring leaf in all the barren waste ; no sound of rushing waters. But Elijah heard the silence for a little space—the acute tingling silence of those arid mountain-tops in utter calm. “ And after the fire a sound of gentle stillness.” More marvellous than all the tempestuous havoc of the storm was that infinite stillness, that utter motionless rest, that dignity of imperturbable silence. There was something here more awful, more holy than the huge titanic riot of the hurricane ; and something sweeter, something that soothed and strengthened his heart. In the storm he could marvel at and praise God’s power, His majesty in terrible judgment. But in this quietness he felt God drawing nigh, companionable, communicative, a whispering Presence by his side, a still small voice. “ And it was so, when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went forth.”

Stillness ! “ The silence that is in the starry sky, the sleep that is among the lonely hills ” ! Not a bird twittered, not a leaf fluttered, not a pebble stirred. And the silence wins the heart of the old prophet into a great passivity.

Silent Spirit ! dwell with me,
I myself would quiet be,
Quiet as the growing blade,
Which through earth its way hath made
Silently, like morning light,
Putting mists and chills to flight.

The mists of Elijah’s soul are dispelled now ; his chill despairs vanish away. He hears the message at last. Again the challenge echoes in the ear of his spirit : “ What doest thou here, Elijah ? ” And again he recites the record of his lonely stand for God, but this time—may we not think ?—not with any querulous ring in his voice as of a man complaining of betrayal, but rather with a note of hope as of one assured of reinforcement and ready for further summonses. And the summons is not delayed.

He receives a commission which is at once to further his work and to dismiss him from duty. "Go, and return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus"—a foreign land. And there? "Anoint the men who shall succeed you. And understand that there are yet many knees in Israel that have not bowed to Baal, many lips that have not kissed him."

It was a humbling commission, and yet a fortifying one. Elijah learnt in the silence that he was not indispensable to this God of infinite power, who could be manifested in such imperturbable placidity. There were vast reserves of strength in this God who could smite the earth with such fury and suddenly rest again in such immovable calm. Had He not made Himself most evident when most invisible? And in His ways with men, if He tarried and kept silence while Jezebel's prophets worked their will, Elijah could nevertheless understand now that the cause was not lost. God was too great for haste; but the end was not yet. He, poor perturbed mortal, must not judge God by the measure of his own exhausted strength. He had done his bit for the true cause. One thing alone remained—that he should ordain his successors, the men through whom God's unhurried purpose should be carried out in future days. Not to one man, or to one generation, was it given to finish the Lord's work, who has all eternity to work in. And thus God's champion learnt that deep confiding faith which breeds at once humility and hope; which puts one in one's place in the ranks of God's army, and gives, at the same time, that sense of fellowship in an imperishable succession which forbids despair.

Herein is all the humbling discipline of change. In every generation and in every social group one or two figures will stand out as unchallenged leaders; their little world seems utterly dependent on them; their names are on every one's lips, maybe for a decade. But times change; and "God fulfils Himself in many ways, lest

one good custom should corrupt the world." These leaders grow old before they are aware of it. Younger enthusiasms are pressing to take their place, enthusiasms they can scarce recognize and may easily be jealous of. The exact atmosphere of social thought in which their particular work came nobly to the front has imperceptibly altered. Their very success has altered it. And the world awaits strange faces, other men. At last these old leaders recognize with astonishment that their day is over ; the wave that carried them aloft has spent itself ; they are no longer the indispensable helmsmen. It is easy, then, for a man to fall into chagrin, for an injured vanity to warp his view of current movements and future prospects, for doubt and distrust of the younger world and its new-fangled methods to turn the old-time pioneer into the timid and carping conservative. These are the peculiar temptations of the elderly ; and only a great faith in God can overcome them, and leave old age full of the grace of humility and the courage of hope. But these patient and gentle virtues are what God demands from the old folk ; for only by them can men link themselves on to the younger generation whom they are bidden to bless and ordain for that divine strife which is at once ever old and ever new. It may tax our faith to fight in the vanguard of God's war ; but the glamour and excitement of leadership stimulate and sustain. It is a far greater tax on our faith to lay aside our well-proved weapons, and, with a graceful disregard of self, to give our encouraging benediction to the younger men who come forward with unaccustomed arms. Yet that is for ever the last commission God lays upon us. We are not to whine despairingly because our onset has not finished the fight ; not to gaze abroad with distrustful contempt as if none but ourselves were left to fulfil God's work ; not to be sullen and suicidal because we cannot enjoy the solitary honour of completed victory. To retire thus from the scene would be pusillanimous indeed. We have to obliterate

self and "keep the young generations in hail," anointing them by wise sympathy and hopeful encouragement. And in so doing we shall ourselves be blessed with the great strength of fellowship, with the sense of membership in an imperishable brotherhood ; and old age will not, then, be sad or lonely.

There lies the reward of Churchmanship, and the encouraging message of apostolical succession. The isolated man, however valiantly good, will be faced with despair at last. He who retains the hope of youth is he who has lost himself in a larger entity ; who can perceive the generations bonded together in a common task under one unchanging God and Father of all ; who believes in a holy catholic Church that overlaps the ages, wherein the torch of truth is passed undimmed from hand to hand.

It fortifies my soul to know
That, though I perish, truth is so :
That, howsoe'er I stray and range,
Whate'er I do, Thou dost not change.
I steadier step when I recall
That, if I slip, Thou dost not fall.

That is the lesson we must learn in the quietness when our own tumultuous fight is lulled. "The One remains : the many change and pass." And we are not God's only servants. It will not be easy for us to appreciate the hurly-burly of the new age, or to see God's sure constructive work going forward in it. It will look, as to Arnold, a mere Bacchanalian revel of undisciplined youth, and we shall turn wistful eyes to the past lying silent behind us where our own firm work was done.

Thundering and bursting
In torrents, in waves—
Carolling and shouting
Over tombs, amid graves—
See ! on the cumber'd plain
Clearing a stage,
Scattering the past about
Comes the new age.

Not readily does the elderly heart respond to this gay new enterprise. It is full of a heavenly glow, is it? "Ah, so the silence was! So was the hush!" Arnold paints exquisitely the human mood of regret and dubious aloofness. But it is a mood to be corrected by a sound religion. Our faith bids us retire hopefully, keeping fellowship with the future, in the spirit of Meredith's jolly line: "I can hear a faint crow of the cock of fresh mornings, far, far, yet distinct." Elijah can no longer bear the brunt of the battle, but he has still a work of benediction to perform, a succession to ordain. With the gracious humility and courageous hope of that act let his life-work be completed.

"Hope thou in God; *rest* in the Lord and *wait* patiently upon Him; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength." . . . "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" . . . "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. But as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I send it." . . . You have fought the good fight; you have finished your course, you have kept the faith. Now separate me these others for the work whereunto I have called them. And do thou tarry while I come.

That is the message of the still small voice—a message of humility and of patience and of hope in God.

THE CHARIOT OF ASCENSION

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more.

II. KINGS ii. 11, 12.

XX

THE CHARIOT OF ASCENSION

IN the records of the earliest evangelization of England no name shines out with greater glory than that of St. Aidan, the apostle of Northumbria. The monks of Iona had sent a mission into north England, but it had soon been given up in despair. The first missionary returned to Iona declaring that no good could be done to such a turbulent race as the Northumbrians. The brethren sat in council deliberating over this bad news. At last, Aidan, who was present, said: "It seems to me that you have been somewhat too harsh with these ignorant men, and have not dealt with them according to the apostle's maxim—first making your teaching easy, and then going on little by little until they could receive the deep things of God." Every one thereupon turned toward the speaker, and said that he was the man to make a second attempt at the great evangelistic task. So Aidan came into Northumbria, and by his very remarkable grace and gentleness won the hearts of the wild inhabitants, and rapidly built up a Christian Church among them. He made his head-quarters at Lindisfarne, which, through the associations of his beautiful piety, became so sanctified a spot in all men's eyes that ever afterwards it was called the Holy Island. And close to this Holy Island, in a shelter beside the tiny church of the king's castle of Bamborough, St. Aidan died in the year 651.

On the night of his death—a summer night in late August—a shepherd-boy was keeping watch over his

flock in the Lammermuir Hills. He was a boy already remarked for a strange piety, and destined later on to become the most famous saint of northern England. This boy, Cuthbert, while his companion shepherds slept, saw a vision of angels bearing a soul to heaven—angels winging their way into the far reaches of the starlit sky above him as he lay there on the open hills. A few days later he learnt that in that same hour St. Aidan had passed away. He took the vision as a call to himself for divine service, and forthwith journeying to Melrose was enrolled there as a monk, and began that great career which is memorialized in English life for ever in the glorious towers of Durham which were raised above his tomb.

Other visions of the heavenly ascension of the dead have been recorded. We are told, for example, how one of the disciples of St. Francis of Assisi, at the time of the saint's death, saw his soul "like unto a star of the bigness of the moon, and beaming with the brightness of the sun, borne above many waters in a shining white cloudlet, ascending forthright into heaven by a straight path." Perhaps such a story may be merely a product of pious literary fancy. But in the case of Cuthbert it would seem that there was a real psychic experience on his part contemporaneous with the death of Aidan : the living shepherd-boy becoming subconsciously aware—through subtle links of spiritual sympathy that we cannot comprehend—of the death of the old bishop scores of miles away ; and this intuitive knowledge expressing itself spontaneously in an imaginative vision, only explicable later on when actual news of the bishop's death arrived. It is anyhow an arresting story, not to be fathomed by merely murmuring feeble words about coincidence.

And our Bible story of the ascension of Elijah must surely be considered in the light of such other stories of the visionary ascent of souls as history provides us with. They will not enable us to give an intelligible account of exactly

what happened at Elijah's death, but they will help to provide a point of view for our approach to that famous story. In their light it will be seen to fall into its place among a group of more or less kindred legends—some, perhaps, merely creations of literary fancy, but others pointing to psychical impressions really received in connection with men's deaths, and greatly deepening the sense of death's unreality and of the victorious survival of the soul. All we can be sure of is that Elisha was credited—probably on the basis of tradition handed down from himself—with having beheld a vision of Elijah mounting heavenwards, as Cuthbert and others have been credited with similar visions more or less authenticated. As to how that vision came, and in what circumstances it came, and what its precise nature was, we can but make our guesses, tracing such measure of fact as is possible in the marvellously dramatic, but all too brief and uninforming, narrative preserved to us.

The scene is once again laid among the mountains. The three most dramatic incidents in Elijah's life-story fall upon great hill-summits—a triangle of summits marking the extreme west, south and east borders of the Holy Land. And each time, on Carmel, on Horeb, and now on Nebo, the prophet stands wrapped in storm. Himself a man of solitary and impetuous spirit, such wild settings are appropriate to him. There is something remote, austere, untamed about him to the last.

Some considerable period had elapsed since his fugitive retreat to Sinai. Ahab and Jezebel had perpetrated their mean crime against Naboth, and the dauntless old prophet had once more risked his life by rebuking the king to his face. But now Ahab was dead, and Jezebel's influence had apparently waned, for the schools of the prophets of Yahweh are numerous and undisturbed. Elijah, aged now, is their revered leader, and Elisha is his constant companion. These were very different circumstances from

what he had expected when, lonely and despairing, he had asked for death, because his work seemed all unavailing and no helper was left to him. God had led him out into a wealthy place after all. His example had inspired the younger generation, and he lived now full of years and honour among troops of adoring friends. He had learnt his lesson of humility and hope; he is less of the egoist, maybe—a little mellowed and more patient, though still a terror to wrongdoers; and he has his reward in human fellowship.

Yet it is the same grand self-reliant figure that we see, with the inborn instinct of the hermit; and as the approach of death becomes imminent he strides away to die alone among the hills.

It is the great tableland of Moab that he goes to, adjacent to his own native country of Gilead, and the place where in the far past Moses had died and been buried by the hand of God, as men declared. It may have been toward Gilead that he was making his way when he crossed Jordan and began climbing into the hills of Moab. Or it may, perhaps, have been that he was preoccupied with the memory of Moses, and would fain seek death in those solitudes where the great hero of the Exodus had taken his farewell of earth. Nebo is one of the highest spurs in that long, almost horizontal, line of hills that flank the eastern beach of the Dead Sea. It is apparently identical with Pisgah, whence Moses viewed the Land of Promise he was never to enter; and it commands a noble prospect of the tumbled hills of Palestine. The tableland of Moab, with its bold westward escarpment, and gradual eastward slope toward the desert, was itself largely cultivated—a land of blowing corn. But it is cut into again and again by deep wild ravines, in much the same fashion as the Cheddar Gorge cuts up into the soft pasture land on the summit of Mendip; and its aspect as seen from the Dead Sea, into which these many ravines descend, is barren in the extreme. The precipitous flanks of these hills of Moab are still infested with wolves, jackals,

hyænas, and vultures. A dead body would not lie long in such a district. "The whole land," it has been said, "is a sepulchre." It frowns there desolate and untamed above the bitter waters and bleached shores of the Sea of Death. Although beyond the shoulders of its cliffs there are smiling cornlands ; and the innumerable ancient cairns and dolmens speak of human occupation in the farthest past ; yet its torn gorges could not be civilized : there the wolf and vulture live out their fierce and hungry lives.

To such a place, sacred with the memory of the death of Moses, Elijah went forth advisedly and deliberately, urged by inward premonition of his own approaching dissolution. He had sought to go forth alone, as did Tolstoi ; as apparently did Moses himself, and as so many lonely-minded men have done in old times. But Elisha will not leave him. Trusty henchman that he is, he determines to be present to the end, and forces his company on Elijah, despite repeated protest, praying only that a double portion—an elder son's portion—of the prophetic spirit may fall upon him as reward for his loyalty. And Elijah vouches that it shall be so if Elisha shows mettle enough to stand with him to the end. So the two men cross Jordan together.

The story as we have it is saturated in supernaturalism, through which one can but grope for reality. Yet there is a superb splendour of restrained excitement in the telling of it, as stage by stage the two men advance upon their journey, that makes the passage of the river, with the help of the miraculous cloak, fall appropriately into its place as but one further ascending step in breathless wonderment toward the final unearthly pageant. The fords of Jordan near Jericho are more difficult than those on the upper reaches of the river, and in times of high flood become impassable. It is highly probable that Elijah would need to take off his mantle in order to avoid a wetting, if not in order to dry up the water by means of it ! Anyhow, the awkward ford is traversed ; and the two men probably

advance up the Wady Ayan Musa, or one of the neighbouring gorges that lead toward the summit of Nebo.

But what then happened is wrapped in impenetrable mystery. Whether by accident in storm, or by a fall over some precipice, or by natural causes, we are not told, but somewhere in those fastnesses Elijah passed away. The two friends were parted asunder. But the whole marvel of the story is that Elisha, left there alone, realized not death but ascension. What he saw was not the pitiful decay of the human body but the glorious ascension of his friend to God. "It came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Surely nowhere else in human literature has death been so sublimely portrayed!

And the wonder of such language is by far the more remarkable when we remember the normal thought of old Israel in face of death. It was easy for a disciple of St. Francis to vision his saintly leader's soul ascending like a star to God, for the Christian hope of centuries had taught men to think of the beloved dead as passing on and up to Paradise. But to old Israel no such hope had been taught. To their thought the dead passed out of God's realm, downward into the abyss of Sheol, into the pit of darkness where no man any longer could praise and serve the Lord. "The grave cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise Thee." That cry of Hezekiah's represents the normal thought of Israel. And so again and again the old psalmists plead for a prolongation of human life on the sunlit earth: "Hide not thy face from me, lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit"; "I am counted with them that go down into the pit, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom Thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from thy

hand. Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Wilt Thou show wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee? Shall thy loving-kindness be declared in the grave? or thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark? And thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?" That is the normal Hebrew imagery of death. It is a descent into darkness, into a land of forgetfulness, where a man is cut off from God, and no longer remembered, no longer capable of communion with Him. There was life of a sort in Sheol, but it was a mere parody of life—chill, godless, unsuccoured. The faith of Israel fluttered feebly and sank hopeless in face of the stark fact of bodily corruption. A New Testament writer, centuries later, could pick out the exceptional case of Enoch, and declare that he was translated that he should not see death; but it is doubtful if such an idea can be legitimately read into that ancient phrase of Genesis that God took him and therefore he was not. The hope of an ascent through death to some grander sphere of life begins to penetrate Hebrew thought only in one or two rare passages of the latest Old Testament writings. In all the earlier period death, without exception, was faced as a practical annihilation, a withdrawal from life and God into some faint numb underground existence, a mere shadow-land—the Pit.

The story of the ascent of Elijah, therefore, stands out in unique significance. It is the first and only occasion where the Old Testament rises triumphantly beyond all dismay of death and seizes upon the hope of a glorious immortality in the wide freedom and dazzling light of heaven. Here, and here alone, is death depicted as a victor's triumphant progress, chariot-driven to the gates of God's own dwelling-place. Not until we reach the New Testament story of Christ's ascension to the right hand of God do we meet with so magnificent an interpretation of the meaning of this strange and staggering experience of man's laying aside of the earthly body.

It is probably futile to attempt to search out the precise reasons for the symbolism of this story. Elijah, and after him Elisha, were themselves spoken of as "the chariots and horses of Israel," so great was their prestige, so strong the power they wielded in the nation. Each of them was worth far more than a regiment to Israel. Each was a host in himself. It may be that Elisha's cry of momentary despair when he realized that Elijah had gone from him—"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof"—has, by some twist in the handing down of this narrative of how "the chariot of Israel" had ascended to God, become confused into a vision of a fiery chariot which Elijah boarded and which carried him away heavenward. But, however suggested, the remarkableness and glory of this tale of heavenly ascension is no wit lessened. The fact remains that here for once, in connection with the great hero-prophet Elijah, Israel's normal attitude in face of death was completely altered, and a great shaft of light breaks suddenly upon the dreary mystery of mortality: a man is visioned not as descending into Sheol, altogether out of God's realm of light and life, but—prodigious hope!—ascending to the zenith to share with angelic hosts, with seraphim and cherubim, the glad brilliance of divine communion in a nearness unapproachable on earth. It is an utter turnover of thought. For the first time in Israel's history faith has broken through the gates of death, and seen there not degradation and annihilation, but glorification and the consummation of all hope. "He was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven." That grand, awful sentence may be said to mark the birth in Israel of the faith in immortality.

That faith is not lightly attained. Only after many centuries of experience and reflection did Israel attain it. It is an indispensable, integral element of our Christian creed, but even after two thousand years of Christian witness it still, of course, remains for the individual to grasp this

faith for himself ; and how many multitudes of would-be Christian folk do not grasp it ! We are still, in the mass, dismayed at death. We still dread it as a loss of all desirable things, all warmth and brightness and love and laughter. We are still overwhelmed by the loathsome and ugly aspects of decay. Like poor Hamlet brooding over Yorick's skull, we see only the gaping hollow where sweet, humorous lips had hung, and cavernous sockets where bright eyes had flashed at us ; and our imagination abhors it all, our gorge rises at it. All this charnel-house imagery stands confronting our faith, a formidable contestant. We need a counter-imagery to lend help to our halting creed—the imagery of the soul's ascension such as we have in this old tale. Not that this in itself can ground us in the faith. To believe in resurrection to eternal life we must first be utterly convinced of God as Father Almighty. The one faith is a direct corollary from the other, and unattainable apart from it. But the faith in resurrection must have its symbols of expression, and the nobler they are the better will our imaginations be saved from engrossment with the skeleton and the worm. So the story of the fiery chariot is very precious for ever. It restores our balance against the maddening weight of cynical reflection when our imagination begins to “trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole.”

Elijah's body was doubtless eaten by wolf or vulture : to search for it was, as Elisha knew, quite futile. But we are never led to think of a few bleached bones in a ravine as all that remained of a magnificent human being. These fleshly relics are out of the picture altogether. Elijah was not *there*. Our backs are turned upon such vision, and we are bidden instead to see the skiey chargers and the wheels of flame, and a man ascending to God.

So that we find ourselves more than half in love with easeful death.

The faith in immortality is integral in our creed. It is not to be outgrown or superseded. There may be recurrent periods—as the mid-Victorian—when many earnest and high-principled folk try to persuade themselves that there is even a superior virtue in throwing away the desire of eternal life. But the fallacy of such an idea is patent. It is but a forlorn way of trying to reconcile the heart to a grim unbelief which makes the universe at once irrational and damnable. A world in which everything perishes with the body is a world in which, at long last, nothing survives at all. The last man dies, and the earth swings about in space, a burnt out cinder ; and nothing of all the marvellous evolution of the æons is garnered. A purposeless, fantastic play has come to an end, that is all. The issue is nullity, a *reductio ad absurdum*. But there can be no other issue unless somehow spiritual values, that is, personal values, survive bodily death. The choice is between a faith in resurrection and a vision of the issue of things so contemptibly silly that all purpose and hope is taken out of life altogether. With the sternest intention possible, nobody really faces up to the latter grotesque absurdity. A Shelley, in his prose writing, will tell us that he denies immortality ; but when he pens *Adonais* his heart talks the language of Christian hope. His language in that poem is the merest moonshine unless the Christian creed be true. On the basis of his own prose denial of personal survival he is merely vapouring when he declares that “the soul of Adonais like a star beacons from the abode where the eternal are,” or when he pictures the kings of thought rising from their thrones in the unapparent to greet the newly dead. Shelley’s heart was wiser than his head in this matter. He illustrates the impossibility of really resting upon a negation of survival. He cannot hold true to his own chilly premises. And we have to thank his illogicality for that grandest of English dirges, *Adonais*. He, too, one feels pretty sure, would

have come in time to accept in all soberness the gospel of resurrection as the necessary intellectual basis for any such imagery as he allowed himself in his poem. Anyhow, *Adonais* could hardly have been written outside Christendom. Its thought is fed from Christian fountains. It breathes the atmosphere of unconquerable hope that Christianity finally spread abroad and alone can firmly sustain—an atmosphere whose first breath, like the first detached stirring of the wind at dawn, is felt in this ancient tale of Elijah's chariot of fire. It was because of this story, and of every glorious expression of faith in resurrection which had followed it down the centuries, that the triumphant closing stanzas of such a poem as *Adonais* could be written by a man whose doubts were yet holding him back from a whole-minded conviction of the Christian truth. Elisha's story lit a candle in the world which can never be put out. Gradually the idea of Sheol was ousted from men's minds, and they began to be able to look upon the death of a righteous man as an exultant escape from weakness into power, from earth to heaven's glory. God's triumphal car awaited him, like a hero returning from the wars. And so death could be accepted gladly, as life was accepted gladly. Both are overruled by the one God who doeth all things well, and whose will toward us is love.

We no longer dream of going down into the pit. Death has lost its horror. "Into the breast that gives the rose, shall I with shuddering fall?" We no longer cry out for an indefinite prolongation of life in the body, as the old psalmist did. Rather we say with Stevenson :

Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie ;
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.

For we lie down but to rise again. We lose this body of humiliation that we may be clothed upon with a body of glory.

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face. . . .
No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the element's rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest !

So has God led our poor, brave, bewildered race out
of darkness into His marvellous light, and given us to see
through death the glory of the soul's ascension

XXI

THE INVISIBLE ALLIES

When the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master ! how shall we do ? And he answered, Fear not : for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man ; and he saw : and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

II. KINGS vi. 15-17.

XXI

THE INVISIBLE ALLIES

THE prophets of old Israel were sometimes in positions of great political influence. Isaiah, for example, seems to have been a sort of Prime Minister in his day. And the older prophets, Elijah and Elisha, were both, in their very different fashions, extremely influential personages in the life of their times : Elijah, a man of the wilderness, a solitary, with something of fanatic fire in him, who dashed down upon the cities now and again with his thunderous denunciations against base superstition and social wrong ; Elisha, in his youth a prosperous farmer, afterwards a town-dweller, an astute man of affairs, and apparently the head of a college or order of prophets, like a Superior among the Dominicans or the Jesuits. Elijah's influence was political only in the way of a John the Baptist or a Savonarola—an intense moral force for kings and courts to reckon with in its influence on the crowd. But Elisha is a frequenter of cities and courts. He is interviewed by kings and captains. He has a share in the direction of national affairs, as a trusted counsellor. He is the dominant figure in society—the Beckett or the Wolsey of his day. We are sometimes brought up to think of him as a pious old gentleman whose chief function on earth was to provide a source of fun to rude children who laughed at his bald head. But that old nursery tale is not really a very important part of the life-story of this great man. Legend has woven many impossible tales around his name ; indeed, no figure in the Old Testament is credited with such a record of amazing

thaumaturgy. But we are able to trace through all this something of the astuteness and breadth of power by which he won so tremendous a prestige ; and we can discern clearly enough what important and splendid services he wrought on behalf of his people.

In the story with which we are here concerned we learn that Israel had been attacked by the Syrians from the neighbourhood of Damascus, whence, some years before, the warrior Naaman had come to Elisha to be healed of his leprosy. A tiresomely long war was being fought out. Again and again the Syrian king found his plans prevented and foiled in a most vexatious manner. He is convinced that there must be a traitor in his ranks, making communications to the enemy. But his generals know better. It is all due to Elisha, they say. Elisha finds out everything. "Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber." It was extremely disconcerting. But there was the fact. Elisha was acting as a sort of chief of the secret service department of Israel's war office, managing time after time to get wind of the enemy's movements and to warn his king against various ambuscades. How he managed it we do not know ; but his eminent success in the work is vouched for by the Syrians themselves. And so acute is their sense of Elisha's uncanny knowledge of all their plans that they come to regard him as an insuperable obstacle to their victory ; and they determine that, if the war is to be won, Elisha must first be taken prisoner—a very high compliment to the thoroughness and cleverness of his work as Israel's intelligence-officer.

At the time that this resolution was taken Elisha was living at a little village called Dothan or the Two Wells. It still bears this name, and still shows two springs and two ancient cisterns. It was at this place that Joseph's brethren put him into the well-pit. The village stands on a hillock in a small plain among the hills of Samaria. It lies near

the northern edge of these hills, and the valley surrounding it debouches northward into the great plain of Esdraelon ; and an ancient high road runs through it which links the plain of Esdraelon with the plain of Sharon. It was a place, therefore, of great strategic importance—one of the chief northern outposts of Samaria. Standing in the village and looking northward into the great plain, one would be overlooking the historic battlefield of Israel : the field of Megiddo, or Armageddon, where all Israel's most critical fights had taken place. Dothan stood like a watch-tower at the edge of the hills, strong in the natural fortification of its isolated hillock—a Samaritan Stirling.

The Syrian army was doubtless in the plain of Esdraelon or on the slopes of the hills to the north of it ; and so Elisha's lodging at Dothan meant that he was "in the line." No more central spot could be chosen for his work on behalf of the army. Samaria, the capital, lay twelve miles to the rear across the hills.

But apparently Dothan itself was not strongly guarded, and the main army was not encamped in its immediate neighbourhood. The Syrians dispatched a large attacking party under cover of night up from the great plain into the Dothan valley, and before dawn the enemy had encircled the village. The surprise was, on this occasion, perfectly successful. Elisha's servant going out of doors in the early morning is aghast to find the village surrounded, and rushes back to his master with the bad news. But Elisha does not turn a hair. He is superbly calm. "Fear not," he says, "for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." And thereupon follows an incident of most admirable pluck, of most daring cleverness, which shows up Elisha as a hero of thrilling adventures ; a man who would win the heart of any schoolboy, if we had imagination enough to see the true meaning of the very compressed and cryptic story related in the Book of Kings, and to expand it into the admirable and amusing yarn of

courage and adroitness that really lies embedded in the sparse verses of that old chronicle.

Elisha knows well enough what the object of the Syrians is in thus surrounding Dothan. But he was going to make an effort to evade capture if he could. He hastily disguises himself; and praying God that they may not have the wit to detect him, walks out boldly to meet them. With the coolest manner imaginable he enters into conversation with them, and hears their purpose from their own lips. "Oh, it is Elisha you are after, is it? I'll take you to him. But this is not the way, nor is this the city where you will discover him: follow me, I'll bring you to the man you are looking for." And he leads them up the valley and over the hill-pass, a twelve-mile tramp down into Samaria, where the whole regiment finds itself trapped and imprisoned. Then, no doubt, off comes Elisha's disguise, and with a polite smile he says, "I think it was Elisha you were seeking for: I am your man. At your service, gentlemen!"

It is an hilariously good tale. It reminds one of the yarns told about Lord Kitchener in his earlier days in Egypt and the Soudan: how he would disguise himself, and, trusting to his splendid mastery of dialect, go riding alone into enemy camps, pick up all the information he wanted, and then return home again to put it all to use in his military work. Or one thinks of that thrilling little episode in the life of Mazzini. He was living in London; but Italian spies were out after him, and they had discovered, and were watching, the house where he lodged. As the story goes, he disguised himself, and strode out of the front door with a cigar in his mouth, fumbled in his pockets for imaginary matches, and then deliberately walked up to one of the spies and asked for a light, and thereupon strolled quietly away.

Or a still closer parallel is shown in a story told of St. Athanasius. He had been exiled from Alexandria by order

of the Emperor Julian, and a threat of still more severe punishment had been launched against him. In obedience to the Emperor's edict of exile he was travelling by boat up the Nile toward some refuge in the desert, when he learnt that a government vessel was pursuing him. So he had his course reversed and turned down-stream again. Soon the government boat was seen approaching ; it hailed them, and asked if they knew where Athanasius was. " He is not far off," said some one, perhaps Athanasius himself ; and off went the government boat on its fool's errand upstream, while Athanasius got comfortably away into hiding. Athanasius ventured on that piece of bluff in order to show his companions that "our protector is more powerful than our persecutor"—words that recall those of Elisha himself.

That, then, is how God smote the Syrians with blindness at the prayer of Elisha. Elisha blinded them by his cool nerve and incomparable effrontery, just as Mazzini blinded the spies, or Kitchener the Arabs in their camps, or Athanasius the emissaries of Julian. Truly it was a heaven-sent blindness, brought about by the spiritual dower of courage and wit in the life of a great man disciplined by prayer and self-regardless service.

And having thus outwitted his foes, Elisha saved them by a noble act of magnanimity. They were prisoners of war, and the king at once thought of putting them all to death. " Shall I smite them, my father ? Shall I smite them ? " he says to Elisha. But the great prophet forbade the slaughter, and ordered food and drink to be set before them ; and when they had had a good meal, he sent them back again to the Syrian camp. And that great act of magnanimity seems to have put an end to the war. The King of Syria had grace enough to make peace with so merciful an enemy. " So the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel."

This was a great man, in good sooth. No wonder they

called him "the chariots and horses of Israel"! He was worth an army corps to his king and country.

But we have thus far overlooked the most impressive feature of all in this thrilling little story. When, in the early morning, Elisha's servant came trembling with the news that Dothan was surrounded, the poor fellow had cried desperately, "Alas, my master! how shall we do?" Elisha rebukes his timidity. And then, we are told, Elisha prayed, "Lord, open his eyes, that he may see." And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. The secret of Elisha's courage, as of Mazzini's, lay in his faith. He felt that God was with him, and that material force is as nothing against spiritual power. To the man of spiritual vision there are enormous invisible reinforcements available which make it impossible for him to despair. If he is fighting for the right against criminal aggression, then the whole force of God's universe is on his side. It is impossible for right to be finally overthrown, no matter what temporary disasters may befall it. If God reigns, then justice will prevail, and no power of evil men can prevent it prevailing. To be on the side of right is to be on the winning side. For there is that in the heart of man—the spark of the Holy Spirit in him—which will not permanently tolerate evil; and every struggle on behalf of the good cause will sooner or later arouse to its support all the will towards good which exists latent in humanity. In the long run it is thoughts, emotions, sympathies, volitions which determine victory, not mere mechanical forces of equipment. Where the spiritual forces are lacking, the mechanical forces will in the long run exhaust themselves. But spiritual forces are inexhaustible, for they draw upon the almighty power of God.

It was because Israel, as a nation, felt this reliance upon spiritual power more deeply than did other ancient peoples, that it stands out, and its literature stands out, in a peculiar,

unique fashion in the world's history. Not that the average Israelite lived up consistently to the level of the Old Testament faith at its best. Far from it. But, generation by generation, this people did throw up great prophetic souls in whom the fire of this faith burnt blazingly clear. And the nation was again and again saved by them. Through captivity in Egypt and in Babylon, through civil warfare and border warfare, through the traitorous idolatry of bad kings, and the cowardly sloth of a bad populace, the sublime faith in a God who loved righteousness was preached from age to age quenchlessly. The greater souls in Israel never lost sight of their invisible allies. If the nation remained true to its divine calling, God would see it through all perils, and no force on earth could wrest from it its final prosperity and beatitude. That was the intense conviction of the prophets. It was the intense conviction of this great man Elisha. And so, for him, there was always an open vision of the horses and chariots of fire. Aye, and his faith could inspire the vision in others. His timid servant, rushing scared into his presence, wins quietness and assurance as Elisha prays for him ; and the young man's eyes are opened : he, too, sees the invisible cohorts of heaven, the bodyguard of righteousness—present always to the eye of faith ; invisible only to the purblindness of earth-bound souls. To Jesus in Gethsemane it comes with perfect naturalness to exclaim : “ Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels ? ” Faith speaks thus, because faith is so sure of God's defence of right.

There is a pretty story in Moslem literature which very closely parallels this story of Elisha at Dothan. An old woman was in dire trouble, it is said, because her son was doomed to execution as a martyr for his faith. In her trouble she prays ; and lo ! she finds herself borne through the air in the twinkling of an eye to Mecca. She hurries

to the authorities in that city and begs for an army to be sent to her son's rescue. The authorities give over to her a warrior named Rassalu and four others. But when they approach and make preparations to start the journey, the old woman is utterly disheartened and contemptuous : " You are very few," she says ; " what is the use of your marching against Sialcot ? " " Don't worry, mother," says Rassalu. She is a little mollified and encouraged by the modest confidence of his manner. " I will try not to worry," she says ; " for all that, I cannot help seeing that you are only five." " Shut your eyes," says Rassalu. And when he bade the old woman open them again, behold ! the plain was covered with a host that seemed countless, and the trampling of their horses was like the sound of many thunders. It was the invisible army of justice which for ever fights in reinforcement of every courageous effort to right the wrong or to defend the true. And there we find in Moslemism a story symbolizing this vision of the eye of faith in just the same manner as in the old Jewish story of Elisha.

There are moments of grave peril in the history of every nation when it sorely needs such prophetic souls to give it the vision of the chariots of heaven. No doubt the legend of the angels at Mons arose through imaginative representation of this great moral conviction that a just cause has heaven's help to back it. How the story originated has been much in dispute ; but its author was in the line of the prophets. The thing is true for faith—like the vision of the Fourth Man in the fiery furnace. It is moral truth on the plane of the imagination. With less fancifulness, but with a far deeper weight and dignity, Wordsworth sang out the same truth to England in the terrible months when our country was daily expecting an invasion by Bonaparte. Among that glorious series of sonnets dedicated to liberty which he composed, one of the most notable is addressed, not indeed directly to his own countrymen,

but indirectly to them as fighters (so he hoped) in the same cause of liberty for which the hero of this sonnet had struggled : it is addressed to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the great negro soldier who had liberated the island of Hayti from Spanish and British slavers, and who, aiming also at independence from France, was taken captive, and ultimately died in a French dungeon. Wordsworth bids him believe that his cause shall not perish, though he himself falls never to rise again. His cause cannot perish, because it is a cause of right ; and the stars in their courses fight on behalf of it.

Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee ; air, earth and skies ;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee ; thou hast great allies ;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

It was with adorable words like these that Wordsworth tried to nerve the heart of England in its hour of peril. The exultant hope which nestles at the heart of liberty, the agonies of willing martyrs who shed their blood, and that pulse of love which, as Dante said, "moves the sun and every star"—these unvanquishable powers, which only faith can see and estimate, are the guarantee of the ultimate triumph of good. It is treachery to doubt. It is treason to despair. God reigns ; and His Will shall prevail. "Wherefore seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

The good cause will often enough seem a forlorn hope. The world's evil is gigantic, and there is more of it than we see. We fight not merely against flesh and blood. "Principalities and powers mustering their unseen array" are against us. We cannot delimit all the ramifications of devilish force within creation : they stretch beyond our ken. But we believe in God the Father Almighty, an all-soveran God whose hold upon the world's throne is

shaken by no rebellion, however portentous ; who is infinitely resourceful to meet and overrule every evil that emerges in His world—not a despot's world where contradiction of the sovran will is impossible ; but love's world where risks are run, because God's heart could be satisfied with no less brave a world than this wherein His victory is the constraint of love upon creatures free to accept or to reject Him. But His love is serenely confident in its power to win. Let evil be never so great, yet God outmatches it. "I beheld Satan as lightning fallen from heaven," said Jesus exultantly. God's unseen array is mightier than all the powers and principalities mustered against His rule. For love is indefeasible, far deeper than man's deepest hate. So God's Church goes into the fight with a merry nonchalance. The chariots of fire are in the van. And it doubts not that, God aiding it, it will be able finally to beat down Satan under its feet.

The grand words of old Elisha ring out the true Christian clarion : "Fear not ; for those that be with us are more than those that be with them." Oh ! timid brothers, doubtful whether evil is not all too strong for you, aghast at its seeming success, agitated with feverish anxieties, open the eyes of your souls and see the horses and chariots of heaven !

THE DESTRUCTION
OF SENNACHERIB

And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand : and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.

II. KINGS xix. 35.

XXII

THE DESTRUCTION OF SENNACHERIB

THE ancient world was dominated by two mighty river states—Egypt on the Nile, and Chaldea, or afterwards Assyria, in the country round about the great twin rivers Tigris and Euphrates. The command of a great river was the necessary basis of prosperity and power in those earliest days of human civilization, as the command of the Mediterranean was necessary in the classical period, or as the command of the ocean has been in the modern world. Material wealth and power have always rested upon water transit. Transit of the open ocean or even of the middle sea was next to impossible in man's earliest civilizations. But his craft could succeed in river navigation. And hence it was along the beds of the greatest rivers that the first empires were built up.

The empires of the Nile and of the Euphrates arose pretty nearly simultaneously, somewhere round about the period 3000 B.C. Between them lay desert—the great Arabian desert with one arm stretching north-westward across Sinai to the Mediterranean coast ; and nestling, as it were, on this arm and against the great bosom of the main desert lay the little land of Syria-Palestine—a narrow strip of fertile hill-country washed by the tideless Middle Sea. Now the main desert was almost impenetrable. For the people of the Nile to reach the people of the Euphrates they must cut across the arm of desert above Sinai, traverse Palestine and Syria, and reach the great river of the East near its sources among the northern mountains, whence

descent was easy into the Mesopotamian plains. And it was not very long before the imperial ambitions of Egypt and the Mesopotamian Powers thrust each of them out toward the other. For several hundred years the destinies of the world swayed in this imperial duel. And the ground where the two giants grappled with each other was the Syria-Palestine area. The little kingdoms nestling there were trampled on again and again, or were bullied by the rival imperial diplomacies into becoming buffer states one way or the other. They formed the cockpit of the ancient world as Belgium has been the cockpit of Europe. Once only, under Solomon, did it seem possible for a moment that a third central power might arise strong enough to hold the two great river states asunder. But the hope was fugitive. The sheer geographical facts made its realization impossible.

In the long rivalry of these old empires it was Assyria which, for the most part, was ascendant. The Assyrians were the Prussians of the ancient world—men of blood and iron, who worshipped a war-god and preached a doctrine of frightfulness. For the best part of a millenium they terrorized the earth, spreading in all directions their empire of loot and slavery. And about the year 700 B.C. we find them on the last great crest of their victorious power under the rule of the warrior Sennacherib, who claimed to be All Highest upon earth. In the language of his own inscriptions he was “the great, the powerful king, the King of the Assyrians, of the nations, of the four regions, the diligent ruler, the favourite of the great gods, the observer of sworn faith, the guardian of law, the establisher of monuments, the noble hero, the strong warrior, the first of kings, the punisher of unbelievers, the destroyer of wicked men.” Evidently a man who got up quite early ! And kingdom after kingdom fell before this Sennacherib. Tyre and Damascus, Moab and the Arabs of the desert all bowed before his onset. And now his eye was set upon distant

Egypt—that old effete colossus that he was determined finally to smash to pieces, putting an end once and for all to its insolent attempts at rivalry. But to reach Egypt he must first overcome the frontier fortresses in Philistia. And as he flung his armies down the coast to seize these places, he sent off an embassy of haughty officials, backed by a few regiments, to demand the surrender of the little hill-fortress of Jerusalem, which he suspected to be in league with Egypt.

It was a moment of overwhelming danger for Jerusalem. All the other fenced cities of the hills had already given in to the invader. King Hezekiah, who for some years had maintained a brave and dignified defiance toward Assyria, himself now trembled and gave way, stripping the very Temple of its treasures in order to buy off Sennacherib's wrath. An ancient inscription at Nineveh records it all in these terms: "Because Hezekiah, King of Judah, would not submit to my yoke, I came up against him, and by force of arms, and by the might of my power, I took forty-six of his strong fenced cities, and of smaller towns which were scattered about, I took and plundered a countless number. And from those places I captured and carried off as spoil 200,150 people, old and young, male and female together, with horses and mares, asses and camels, oxen and sheep, a countless multitude. And Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates to prevent his escape. Then upon this Hezekiah there fell the fear of the power of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem, with thirty talents of gold, and eight hundred talents of silver, and divers treasures, and rich and immense booty."

But Sennacherib was not satisfied with this tribute, although he brags about it so vaingloriously. Exactly what happened is not clear. Despite the tribute, Jerusalem

remained uncaptured, and apparently still in diplomatic relations with Egypt. And the Assyrian warrior, busy with the siege of Lachish, could not afford to leave on his flank this insubordinate little fortress of Jerusalem. So his squadrons are sent up into the hills ; and the Rabshakeh and the Rabsaris—the Chief Cup-bearer and the Chief of the Eunuchs—together with the Tartan or Field-Marshal, appear at the city gates demanding audience, and threatening Jerusalem with utter overthrow if Hezekiah does not forthwith throw in his lot with the Assyrians and provide troops for their campaign.

Never before had so dire a peril threatened the Holy City. Hezekiah is at his wit's end. But one of the greatest personalities ever known in Jewish history was at the helm of affairs in Jerusalem—the great statesman-prophet Isaiah. And to him the king turns in his hour of agony, beseeching him to pray to God for deliverance.

What hope could Isaiah give ? What possibility of succour was there ? It was as though the great Tigris and Euphrates themselves had swept westward, and with huge irresistible flood had submerged all Palestine. The material military force of Assyria was utterly overwhelming. It seemed the wildest folly for a little isolated city like Jerusalem to attempt for one hour to stand against it. But Isaiah was trained in the succession of those great prophetic men who had felt in the very marrow of their souls a conviction of the rule on earth of a God of Righteousness. They refused to believe that final victory lay with the big battalions. They believed that moral power was more deeply founded than material power. There was a force of conscience that no militarism could crush. And they were assured that, through whatever temporary defeat and martyrdom, the God of righteousness would at last justify the men of spiritual ideals against any and every domineering empire that sought for its own aggrandisement to enslave the earth. And therefore Isaiah stood undismayed. He

believed that his people had a mission on earth to witness for true religion, for faith in the one and only God. And because of this he believed that God would defend their liberty and leave them room to develop their own peculiar institutions, until all nations should have learnt from them the spiritual message with which they were entrusted. In earlier years he had, indeed, himself declared that such divine defence would depend upon Israel's religious loyalty. He had warned his people that if they lost their spiritual distinction and followed the worldly ideals of other nations, then they, too, would share the fate of other nations, and become mere pawns in the game of Assyria's earthly conquests. But he had never wholly despaired of his people's conscientiousness. He had seen on the horizon of their future the coming of the Prince of Justice and Peace, whose rule, acclaimed by all, should abide for ever. No one had more sternly whipped the national vices than he. Yet he still trusted to the core of good in his people. They were not utterly apostate ; and, until they were so, their God would not give them over to the enemy.

And so Isaiah in this perilous crisis stands unmoved. And when the king appeals to him he sends back the unhesitating answer : " Thus saith the Lord, Be not afraid of the words with which the servants of the King of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land ; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land."

It was a superb defiance. The scene is really one of epic grandeur. Isaiah and Sennacherib embody the two forces which all through history have struggled for the rule of mankind : Sennacherib, the type of all worldly ambition and materialistic dominance ; Isaiah, the type of all spiritual faith in freedom, justice, patience, and peace. One man with a burning conscience in a little beleaguered town, the capital of a tiny country no bigger than an English

county, stands confronting, in the moral courage of his faith in God, the enormous dominion of the Assyrian tyrant. The same drama has been played over and over again in history, but never more vividly than here. It was played by Tell, by Garibaldi, by King Albert of Belgium. It must still be played again and again before men learn its lesson, and understand the powerlessness of might against right. But for ever the world will look back to Isaiah confronting Sennacherib as perhaps the sublimest example history can show of a national policy founded upon passionate religious conviction. "O Lord, Thou art my God ; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name ; for Thou hast done wonderful things ; Thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall. Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee." Those are Isaiah's own words, and in that faith he stood to resist the Assyrian aggression.

His faith was justified. After the first rejection of their demands, the Assyrian officials come a second time to Jerusalem bearing a letter from Sennacherib himself. He has left Lachish and is marching southward to meet the advance of the Egyptian army. It is more than ever necessary to get this Jewish insubordination subdued without loss of time. He contemptuously bids Hezekiah give up the nonsense of trust in his God : "Let not thy God in whom thou trustest deceive thee. Have the gods of the other nations delivered them out of my hands ?" Hezekiah carries the letter into the Holy Place of the Temple, and spreads it before the Lord, and prays : "Of a truth, Lord, the Kings of Assyria have destroyed the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire ; for they were no gods but the work of men's hands, wood and stone : therefore have they destroyed them. Now, therefore, O Lord our God, I beseech Thee, save Thou us out of his

hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that 'Thou art the Lord God, even Thou only.'

The suspense must have been terrible. Would the great battle far to the south leave Egypt victorious and so deliver Jerusalem? Or would the conquering Assyrians return in a few days to flay alive, after their manner, Hezekiah and his trembling people? But Isaiah dictates an answer to the embassy couched in terms of resolute defiance. The virgin daughter of Zion laughs them to scorn, he declares, and shakes her head at them. Her God will take this brute beast of Assyria, and put a hook in its nose and a bridle in its lips, and will drive it back by the way it came. Let them take that for an answer.

And now nothing was to be done but to await the issue, as it seemed, of the great battle on the frontier. Some hours of dread suspense go by; and then all Jerusalem leaps into exultant, maddening joy, when the news arrives of the prodigious catastrophe which destroyed Sennacherib's host. Our Bible story leaves the whole incident in inscrutable mystery. "The angel of the Lord went out and smote the camp of the Assyrians." That is all we are told. But the probable key to the mystery is provided elsewhere. Herodotus tells a story, gleaned from Egyptian sources, of how the King of Egypt, when thus threatened by Sennacherib, and being deserted by his army, entered like Hezekiah into his temple and prayed. Then, cheered and strengthened by his prayer, he gathered together an army of artisans and marched out to meet the Assyrians at Pelusium. There, during the night, a multitude of mice devoured the bow-strings of the enemy, who on the morrow precipitately fled. Such is the Egyptian version of the incident. And we learn from it that the catastrophe fell upon Sennacherib, near Pelusium, whereas our Bible account leaves the locality unhinted at. And we learn, too, in all probability—as, indeed, the Bible account would have suggested—that the destroying angel was the plague.

For the mouse was a symbol of plague, as we see from the story in 1. Samuel vi., being recognized even in those early times as a chief plague-carrier ; and the picturesque story of the mice eating up the Assyrian bow-strings is probably only a fanciful way of expressing the fact that the Assyrian army was paralysed by plague, which suddenly overtook it in that pestilent neighbourhood of Pelusium—notorious throughout the ancient world for its virulent unhealthiness. It lay upon the edge of those treacherous marshes that went by the name of the Serbonian Bog. Sir George Adam Smith reminds us that a Persian army was decimated there in the fourth century before Christ ; that the disease which depopulated the earth in the days of Justinian first appeared in the neighbourhood of Pelusium ; and that the Crusaders suffered infection in this district. The foul vapours of these malarious marshes might work terrible destruction in an army ; and there can be little doubt that here was the spot and here the cause of the overthrow of Sennacherib. With violent swiftmess the plague overtook him, like an angel in the night ; and, as our Authorized Version says with an unintentional touch of Irish humour, “when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses.”

So heavy was the catastrophe that the proud Sennacherib was forced to turn tail without offering battle to the Egyptians. The detachment left at Jerusalem slunk off amazed, and the whole host melted away across the northern hills and back into Nineveh. It was Assyria's last aggressive campaign, and she never recovered from it. A few years later that tyrant empire had finally passed away.

The might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Had melted like snow in the glance of the Lord.

Perhaps the only adequate historical parallel is Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, when in one night of bitter frost 20,000 horses are said to have perished, and the Grand

Army of 250,000 men, without any decisive defeat on the field, dribbled back, a broken and ragged mob, to the frontier, and only 12,000 of them ever reached home again.

So was Isaiah's confidence startlingly justified. Worldly might had overreached itself, and an arrogant imperialism was laid in the dust. It was by far the most dramatic vindication of their faith that had ever been vouchsafed to Israel. And Isaiah's noble voice rises into a lyrical rapture of praise : " Now will I arise, saith the Lord ; now will I be exalted ; now will I lift up myself. Hear, ye that are afar off, what I have done ; and, ye that are near, acknowledge my might. The sinners in Zion are afraid " (sin and oppression among his own countrymen are as vile to him as among the foreign tyrants, true patriot as he is) ; " fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire ? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings ? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly ; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hand from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil ; he shall dwell on high : his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks : bread shall be given him ; his waters shall be sure.

. . Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not : behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense ; He will come and save you. . . . And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads : they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

With these words, written under the impulse of so great a deliverance, the prophecy of Isaiah closes. For forty years, since that far-off day in youth when he trembled before his vision of God in the Temple, and the angel had touched his lips with the living coal, this man had

been the bulwark of his nation, challenging his fellows again and again with God's oracles, pleading with them to be loyal to the Right, in the assurance that right was might in a universe of moral order. Now the work of his lifetime was crowned with blessing. The agelong terror of Assyria was banished like a nightmare at waking. And it seemed to the eyes of hope that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, where a king should reign in righteousness, and princes should rule in justice ; where base servility should be done away, and the vile person no more be cringed to as noble, but where the truly great man should stand out in ungrudged leadership like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. Alas ! that day is still to dawn. But its ultimate advent is guaranteed by such great incidents in the past as this story records for us. Humanity learns to find its true path very slowly ; but there are turning-points in history which, having once rounded, we cannot altogether forget. When Isaiah staked all against Sennacherib and won, he secured a permanent victory for the soul of mankind : the faith that he then established is, despite all base tergiversation, a perpetual inheritance for our race. He showed up the hollowness of the big battalions. He broke their spell. And, on the foundations of his faith in a God of Right, tyranny after tyranny has been crumpled up on earth ; the empires of personal aggrandisement, of loot and lust and cruelty, have been steadily counteracted and destroyed. And the world moves on toward liberty, equality, fraternity ; toward universal commonwealth. The war-gods and the lust-gods are losing hold. The God of Righteousness wins His way, whose service is perfect freedom, whose will is our peace.

XXIII

THE FOURTH MAN
IN THE FURNACE

Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire ? They answered and said unto the king, 'True, O King. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt ; and the form of the fourth is like a son of the gods.

DANIEL iii. 24, 25.

XXIII

THE FOURTH MAN IN THE FURNACE

IT is strange that the man Daniel, who figures so prominently in the romantic literature of later Judaism, is nowhere spoken of in the chronicles of Jewish history. There is, indeed, a Daniel mentioned in Ezra viii., in the list of those who returned from captivity; and again in Nehemiah x., among those who sealed the covenant of the new law. But nothing more is said concerning him. The prophet Ezekiel, however, refers to some one named Daniel as an outstanding type of godly wisdom, naming him along with Noah and Job: he represents God declaring that not even three such men as Noah, Daniel and Job should be able to deliver a sinful land from its just punishment. And elsewhere Ezekiel mockingly taunts the King of Tyre as one who supposed himself to be wiser than Daniel. In Ezekiel's day, therefore, Daniel was a recognized figure in the roll of Jewish heroes—one whose name was proverbial for wisdom. But the Daniel who is the hero of this book that bears his name is represented as a contemporary of Ezekiel in the days of the Captivity. It is difficult to think of Ezekiel referring to any contemporary, however distinguished, in the same breath with legendary saints like Noah and Job. And if he indeed did so, it is the more difficult to reconcile the silence, concerning this Daniel, of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah with the presence in the actual life of their day of so distinguished and already almost legendary a figure.

But romance would hardly have gathered around the name of Daniel without some basis in fact. There evidently was such a man, renowned for extraordinary wisdom, whose character had already become proverbial by the time that Ezekiel wrote his prophecies. More than that we cannot say ; for the Book of Daniel itself, though vaguely founded upon historic tradition, must not be looked to for accurate chronicle. It is an historic romance, like Scott's *Ivanhoe* ; written, as all critics now agree, in the second century before Christ, during the perilous days of the Maccabean revolt—that is to say, some four hundred years subsequent to the period of Nebuchadnezzar.

And a very moving romance it is, with an admirable sense for dramatic incident, for the picturesque handling of detail, and the tense thrill of tragic adventure. It is as blood-curdling as a “ penny dreadful,” yet with an austere moral passion underlying it which gives it an almost hieratic dignity and stateliness of tone. It is a tract against idolatry and worldliness, a vehement pronouncement of God's judgments, and a call to patriotic and holy ardour, all shaped into breathless drama by a deft story-teller's art. A very notable book indeed.

And it was a most telling tract for its times. It was written in the days when Israel was tortured by the vile oppression of Antiochus Epiphanes, who tried his utmost to stamp out Judaism and enforce the worship of the Greek gods—even planting a pagan altar in the Holy Place, making there “ an abomination of desolation.” Those were days which called for an almost fanatical zeal on the part of every Jew, if the distinction of his religion was to be preserved. Yet there was a strong Hellenizing party in Jerusalem, ready to make terms with Antiochus and to ape his idolatrous manners. It was in view of the peril of this internal treachery of indolent and worldly men that the author of Daniel put forth his vehement plea for tenacious loyalty to the faith of the fathers ; trying to arouse

all honest consciences by thrilling tales of the martyrs in the old bitter days of captivity, and how they were preserved by God from fiery furnace and lion's den. And it was the temper of this book which animated the Maccabees when they rose in their valiant revolt against the tyrant, and by superb deeds of daring shook off the alien yoke, and gave back to Israel its freedom and its holiness.

One can picture the stories of this book being told to eager boys in many a Jewish cottage-home, rousing them to valorous resolve for the love of God and country ; as in Millais' picture we see the English lads drinking in the wonderment of tales of the Spanish Main, and all aglow with desire to go forth and emulate the great deeds of their sailor-fathers. There was in this book the same sort of crusading temper aroused against an idolatrous and tyrannical foreign religion as we see depicted in Kingsley's *Westward Ho !* Its author wrote, as Kingsley wrote, in a fighting temper. And such work will necessarily be partisan. But as there was enough of real cruelty and stubborn obscurantism in the Roman Church of the sixteenth century to warrant Kingsley having a sharp tilt at it in his historical novel, so much more, in all probability, was there good cause for this old writer to paint in very horrid and contemptible colours the tyrannous rule and silly idolatry of Nebuchadnezzar. Anyhow, against Antiochus no partisan opponent could speak too fiercely. Antiochus merited the ugliest and most damning portraiture. And it is Antiochus, with his attempt to make all Jews sacrifice at his abominable altar, against whom our author is really writing under guise of the name and times of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Antiochus did fling the Jews into a fiery furnace of persecution, torturing them in many ghastly ways. And their faith gave them a divine companionship in their fiery trial, and brought them through to ultimate victory. "The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits."

The story of the fiery furnace in Daniel is, then, but an allegory of the terrible persecution under Antiochus. And Daniel himself and his three companions are types, like the Mother and Seven Sons of the Second Book of Maccabees, of the martyr-heroes who defied the pagan despot and suffered at his hands.

The story is finely conceived. Our interest is first aroused in the personality of these four youths, "children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured and skilful in all wisdom, understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace"—a handsome, well-bred group of boys who are set apart to be slaves in the king's own household. But to their physical and intellectual attainments they add the brave integrity of a pure religion, and they refuse to contaminate themselves with the luxurious wines and meats of the royal palace. They live abstemiously with a noble ascetic resolution : not with the squalid and whining asceticism of those who believe that there is a virtue in making oneself miserable ; but with the cheerful self-denial of those who will run no unnecessary risks of temptation, and who win a radiant health by their continence, a clear eye and a quick wit. And they are in due course rewarded by being set in positions of dignity over the affairs of the province of Babylon.

Then we are taken to "the great plain of Dura," where the despot has set up his huge image of gold, and a great concourse of all the notables is gathered together for the ceremony of dedication. We hear the cry of the herald bidding all men fall down and worship this colossal lump of statuary, on pain of death if they refuse. And the whole slavish population flops down before the royal idol. But not these young Jews. They keep aloof. And at once the flatterers of the king buzz round him with the news that these slaves have dared to defy the royal command ; whereupon the old despot works himself into a fury. Daniel

himself has somehow disappeared from the scene, but the three others are hauled up to answer for their effrontery. With bold bluntness they tell Nebuchadnezzar to his face that they will have nothing whatever to do with his egregious godlet : " Our God, whom we serve, will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." In the manner of tyrants, Nebuchadnezzar is forthwith beside himself with rage. The furnace is heated " one seven times more than it was wont to be heated." The strongest bullies in the army are summoned, and the unfortunate trio are bound hand and foot and thrown into the fire. And that, one would suppose, would stop their talk for ever. But alas for Nebuchadnezzar ! He is dealing with forces he cannot in the least understand. He is confronted with that insuppressible faith which again and again in our human story has baffled the worst designs of malice. Like many a martyr who has gone singing to the stake, these young men were actually breaking into triumphant song !

Among the literary fragments associated with the Book of Daniel in its Septuagint version and now gathered into the Old Testament Apocrypha, is the famous *Song of the Three Holy Children*, which some later editor inserted into the narrative of the book at this point. " The king's servants," we are told, " ceased not to make the oven hot with rosin, pitch, tow, and small wood ; so that the flame streamed forth above the furnace forty and nine cubits. And it passed through, and burned those Chaldeans it found about the furnace. But the angel of the Lord came down into the oven together with Azarias and his fellows, and smote the fire out of the oven ; and made the midst of the furnace as it had been a moist, whistling wind, so that the fire touched them not at all, neither hurt nor troubled them. Then the three, as out of one mouth, praised, glorified

and blessed God in the furnace, saying (in the words of the Canticle ever since used in the Church under the title *Benedicite*) : O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. O all ye winds, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. O ye fire and heat, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. O all ye dews and storms of snow, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. O ye lightnings and clouds, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. . . . O ye spirits and souls of the righteous, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever. O ye holy and humble men of heart, bless ye the Lord : praise and exalt him above all for ever."

A glorious canticle of praise it is. And it was a noble faith that could imagine it being sung even by men at the stake. But they were not alone. The martyrs never are. There was a fourth man in the furnace—one whose form was like a son of the gods ; a supernatural presence. And Nebuchadnezzar, smitten with sudden terror, shouts to the three men to come forth. "Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego came forth of the midst of the fire. And the princes and governors and captains, being gathered together, saw these men, upon whose bodies the fire had no power, nor was an hair of their head singed, nor the smell of fire had passed on them." And the story ends with the king's acknowledgment of the God of Israel, and the grant of a free permit to the Jews to worship as they thought fit without molestation.

It is all a parable of the effect of martyrdom throughout the history of man. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." There is a spirit in man, inspired by faith, which refuses to be crushed by any tyranny ; against which all tyranny, with its utmost horrid apparatus of bodily torture, is absolutely powerless. You may burn and mutilate and crucify men's bodies, but their souls remain uncon-

querable. We read the tale of Antiochus and the Jews, of Nero and the early Christians, of the Romish Inquisition and the Protestants ; and every time it is the martyrs who win and the tyrants who lose. The soul of man cannot be dragooned. The martyr's head is bloody but unbowed. For the strongest power on earth is a man's conscience, his sense of an imperative call to do right. That is a power which will rise dominant over all physical distress. It is the power of God in us. And therefore those who serve conscience at terrible odds have that marvellous and blessed sense of a Divine Companion with them, so dramatically figured in this old Hebrew tale. They are comforted with an amazing strength thereby, until their dauntless courage becomes a perpetual astonishment. We are amazed, as we read the heroic martyr-stories, to think how human beings could bear what these have borne ; and borne almost light-heartedly, sometimes with a veritable glee. We see in them not the mere dogged refusal to wince, which some men of iron nerve have shown under torture—the sort of temper fostered in old Sparta when boys were flogged at the public altars in competitive effort after fortitude ; or proudly developed amongst the Red Indian braves. The martyr shows another spirit than this. It is not the fortitude of self-reliant pride, but the carelessness of an overwhelming certitude of faith. God's presence is so intensely felt that man's devilry loses its terrors. “ Fear not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.” Faith can lift a man beyond that fear. The invisible world of spiritual reality so engrosses him that what happens to his body is almost negligible. Nothing can separate him from the love of God. To miss God—that is the only real dread ; and if he can retain his fellowship with God only by passing through a spasm of agony, so be it. His affliction is but for a moment, and worketh for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

So Browning pictures the inscription on the martyr's tomb :

I was born sickly, poor and mean,
A slave : no misery could screen
The holders of the pearl of price
From Cæsar's envy ; therefore twice
I fought with beasts, and three times saw
My children suffer by his law ;
At last my own release was earned :
I was some time in being burned,
But at the close a Hand came through
The fire above my head, and drew
My soul to Christ, whom now I see.
Sergius, a brother, writes for me
This testimony on the wall—
For me, I have forgot it all.

O brave spirits ! What a superb dignity the martyrs have given to our manhood ! What good thing can we not believe of our race when we see men and women reaching these heights of spiritual triumph ! And what an assurance comes to us, through them, of a world of reality beyond the body ; of God and the life everlasting.

This is the miracle of the spirit of man, that he is able to look into the face of the most horrible and dismaying torments and still retain a gleeful assurance of blessing and delight, a communion with God that neither life nor death can destroy. The human spirit, inspired by faith, does actually condemn and annul the vilest ill-usage, and maintain throughout it all a lyrical and laughing confidence in the goodness of God.

In the famous legend of St. Dorothy, her torturers are staggered that they cannot break her will ; she is calmly communing with Christ, and apparently unconscious of pain. "Where is your Christ ?" they say. And Dorothy answers : "Christ is in paradise where the woods are ever adorned with fruit, and roses ever flower ; where the mountains wave with fresh grass and springs bubble up eternally." Theophilus, a cynical lawyer standing by, says mockingly : "Thou spouse of Christ, send me from

paradise some of these apples and roses." Dorothy promises quietly that she will. A little while later, we are told, as she knelt waiting for the executioner's sword to end her torments, she begged a moment's respite, and, as she prayed, suddenly a beauteous youth stood by her in dazzling raiment, who held in his hands three apples and three red roses. Then Dorothy said : " I pray thee, take these to Theophilus, and tell him they are what I promised." Then the sword fell. Meanwhile Theophilus had gone home, and was telling his companions of his jest with the martyr. All at once the angel stood before him, with a grave face, and held out to him the wondrous apples and roses, and said : " Dorothy sends these to thee, as she promised." Then Theophilus believed, and confessed Christ ; and himself died soon after in martyrdom, receiving the baptism of blood.

It is a gracious story, redolent of that marvellous faith that can blot out the horror and ugliness of physical torture with visions of the apples and roses of Paradise. And that martyr's vision, which sees through death's gate into a garden of God, can indeed impress itself on others till they are fired with a like unearthly ardour. Faith does thus bring into actual substantiality the things hoped for, and make evident the things unseen. It has the power of alchemy. Evil is transmuted by it into good, bane into blessing. The fiery furnace becomes a garden where man feels himself walking with God unhurt and unafraid.

Can this be, unless there is reality in the Divine Companionship the martyrs talk of ?

When the slave-girl, Felicitas, was imprisoned at Carthage with Perpetua and others awaiting martyrdom, she gave birth to a child in the dungeon. In her travail she cried out ; and her jailors asked her how she expected to sustain the pains of death if she thus cried out with pain of travail. " It is I myself," she said, " that am enduring these pangs now ; but then there will be Another with

me who will suffer for me, because I shall suffer for Him." And in the amphitheatre where the two women were tossed by a wild cow, there was no sound from their lips except the hymns of praise they sang together. They were sustained by God. They endured the cross, despising the shame, for the sake of the joy that was set before them. These, and thousands like them, have known that the joy of keeping communion with God in a good conscience is greater, incalculably greater, than any ease of body which might come through mean and cowardly compromise. They have demonstrated to the rest of us the utter invulnerability of the spirit, its immeasurable power of rising above all physical fear, and maintaining its hold on heaven in face of hell.

If I still hold closely to Him
 What hath He at last ?
 Sorrow vanquished, labour ended,
 Jordan passed.

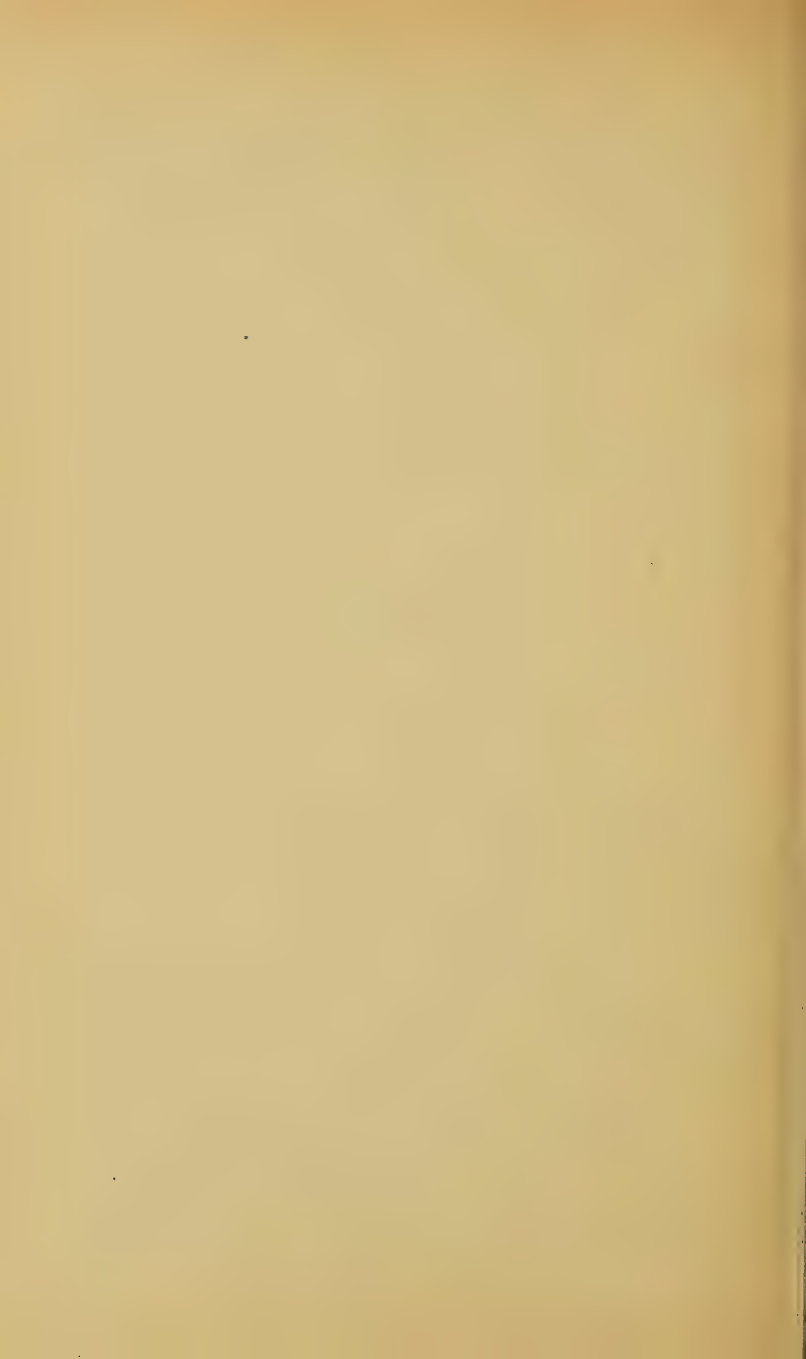
Finding, following, keeping, struggling,
 Is He sure to bless ?
 Angels, martyrs, prophets, virgins,
 Answer, Yes.

The solemn glory of the old Latin hymn sounds across the centuries to us—an echo of "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago" ; but triumphant with a faith that shines through tears, with a sense of rest after agony, with the grasp of an immortal hope. In the furnace of sore affliction and cruel persecution the soul has been conscious of the Divine Stranger bringing quietness. And when He giveth quietness, who, then, can make trouble ?

"What are these that are arrayed in white robes ? and whence came they ? These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more ; neither shall the sun light on them, nor

any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters : and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

Dear God, what faith ! Lord, I believe ; help Thou mine unbelief.



THE HAND WRITING
ON THE WALL

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick on the plaister of the wall of the king's palace : and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.

DANIEL v. 5, 6.

XXIV

THE HAND WRITING ON THE WALL

UNDERLYING the romantic fictions of this Book of Daniel there is a genuine historical element, but it is confused and inaccurate. The cuneiform inscriptions of Babylon have, for example, furnished evidence of the existence of a prince called Belshazzar. But he was not King of Babylon, as this book says : he was only heir-apparent. He may, however, have been in charge of the city at the time of its fall ; and it seems that he was killed during the Persian attack. Again, he was not the son of Nebuchadnezzar : he was the son of Nabuna'id, the reigning king, who was not related to Nebuchadnezzar. But it is possible (though there is no evidence of this) that Nabuna'id may have married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, in which case the grandson Belshazzar might, in the usage of that day, be spoken of as Nebuchadnezzar's "son."

Again, it was Cyrus the Persian who overthrew Babylon, and not Darius the Mede. The Darius whom this book speaks of is quite unidentifiable in any other historic source ; unless, as is sometimes held, he is the Gobryas who, as Cyrus's general, commanded the attack upon the city. But this man was never ruler of the empire, as he is represented to have been in this book, even if we suppose that Cyrus exalted him to some sort of vice-royalty.

The account of the assault on Babylon, too, differs a good deal from the cuneiform narrative ; but here the Book of Daniel is pretty closely supported by the old traditions

related in Xenophon's *Cyropædia*, in Herodotus and in Josephus, which all agree in representing Babylon's overthrow as taking place by a sudden assault in the midst of the celebration of a feast. Our author is, therefore, following a very popular tradition which in all likelihood may have good historical foundation.

It can be gathered from the cuneiform records that the prince, Belshazzar, was a man of military age, taking part in his country's wars. Both he and his father were in Babylon at the time of its capture: the latter was taken prisoner, while the former is said to have been killed in a night assault two or three weeks afterwards, having apparently kept up a resistance to the enemy in some fort, after the main city had fallen. This gives a touch of heroism to Belshazzar which is altogether wanting in his portraiture in the Book of Daniel.

The details of our story, then, are not quite trustworthy, but the main features are fairly accurate—accurate enough, anyhow, for an historical novel, the merits of which are not those of a precise chronicle but of an imaginative presentation of a great passage in human history, with an emphatic purpose of moral appeal.

And the story dealt with here is one of the very great passages of human history. It is the hinge upon which the doors swung open from the ancient world of Semitic imperialism into the great middle period of Aryan imperialism—the empires of Persia, Greece and Rome, upon which the foundations of our modern world were laid. For the Persians alone among the great nations of Central Asia are of the same stock as Greek and Roman and Teuton; and with the entry of the Persian into the sphere of world-politics a new age began; a new age nobly symbolized in the great figure of Cyrus who initiated it.

For this Persian imperialism shows a new and enlightened temper; and from its day forward—very slowly, indeed, and with many reversions—we see the old imperialism of

loot and enslavement gradually transformed into an imperialism of responsibility, protection and development, which culminated at last in Roman justice and world-wide peace. And Cyrus stands alone among the ancient empire-builders as a man honoured for his piety and his humanity. "In both Greek and Hebrew literature he stands as the type of a just and gentle prince," says Dean Stanley. Indeed, the Old Testament references to him are astoundingly eulogistic. To the "Second Isaiah" Cyrus is the Lord's Anointed, a true Messiah: "Thus saith the Lord of Cyrus, he is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure. . . . Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call thee by thy name, am God of Israel. For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name; I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me." Thus, for the first and last time, was a foreigner acclaimed by a Hebrew prophet as the anointed of the Lord, one who, albeit unknowingly, was in practice worshipping Israel's God of Righteousness. And just as the Christian Fathers would sometimes speak of noble pagans like Socrates as Christians before Christ, having *anima naturaliter Christiana*, so the old prophet spoke of Cyrus as belonging to the true Israel, as being, though unwittingly, the Lord's Messiah.

Hence when the cry echoed round the word, "Babylon is fallen," and the humane Cyrus entered upon almost world-wide rule, a new era dawned in history; and that God of Righteousness upon whom Israel staked its faith began to have a recognition among the nations, however dim and wavering, which marked a definite upward step in the civilization of mankind. And this new era was ushered in by a signal act of magnanimity: Cyrus set

Israel free. Judaism had once more a home and a temple from which to evangelize the world.

The fall of Babylon was, therefore, an episode of enormous historical importance. And the author of this Book of Daniel employs all the force of a fine dramatic imagination to impress upon us the thrilling shock of the event, and all the force of his piety to make us discern in it the unescapable hand of Divine Providence.

We all know how the English staff officers were dancing in Brussels on the eve of Waterloo, and we look back on the tale with pleasure as an illustration of the high-spirited sportsmanship with which our people face great issues. For these men were ready, when the signal came, to move off on the instant to their grim duty. And if we glory in the touch of bravado in Drake's game of bowls on Plymouth Hoe, we do so because we know very well that Drake had made his preparations, and was giving no advantage to the enemy by his cool imperturbability. But of a very different character is this scene in old Babylon. Belshazzar is represented as carousing, with the recklessness of a born fool, at a grand feast with his courtiers and courtesans, at the very moment when the Persian army is preparing to break into the city. Not content with supping off the usual plate of the royal household, this fellow, with his head full of wine, orders in the sacred golden vessels that had been captured by Nebuchadnezzar from the Jerusalem Temple. It was an insolent act of frivolous sacrilege and flaunting vanity. These glorious vessels of solid gold, the pride of the Jews and the envy of the Gentiles, had never, we are to suppose, been put to any secular use hitherto. They had been regarded even by their captors with a sort of superstitious reverence, and were kept in the neighbouring temple of Bel. But Belshazzar, with the wine in his head, is determined to stick at nothing which can add to the luxurious indulgence of the hour. He is no warrior recreating himself for a moment, having done his last stroke of prepara-

tion for the fight. He is an idiotic *flâneur*, incapable of realizing danger until it strikes him, incapable of forethought, energy or purposefulness. So he sits in fancied security behind his monstrous city walls, knowing nothing of the great engineering feat by which even now the Persians were on the point of breaking his defences ; and publicly flaunting a wild act of sacrilegious insult which would arouse a fury of just resentment in the breast of every Jew in his dominion—a deliberate provocation to revolt at a moment when he needed the loyal help of his every subject. But he recked nothing of all this. He was out to enjoy himself and damn the consequences. What on earth did it matter to him what a parcel of slaves might think about his action ? He would have his fling ; and if any of his nobles felt a bit squeamish, the worse poltroons they !

So on went the feast, with the wine passed round in goblets of gold. Toasts were drunk to the national idols, and the frivolous crowd waxed heady with merriment. And then, “ in the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall. Then the king’s countenance changed, and his knees smote one against another.”

“ *Menē, tekēl, perēs,*” were the words upon the wall—mysterious words which the astrologers could not decipher, and which the scholars have puzzled over ever since. The interpretation of them given in the Book of Daniel itself seems to be about as plausible a one as can be arrived at. *Menē* has, it is suggested, the meaning “ numbered ” ; *tekēl*, the meaning “ weighed ” ; and *perēs* or *upharsin* (singular and plural forms of the same word), the meaning “ division ” or “ things divided.” Hence the paraphrase by which Daniel interprets the message : “ God has numbered your days ; thou art weighed in the balances, and found wanting ; your kingdom shall be divided up among the Medes and Persians.” Those who are curious to inquire further, however, may consult Dr. Charles’s notes

in his popular commentary in the *Century Bible*, where they will find various alternative explanations. It is pointed out in particular that these words are nouns not participles, and some scholars maintain that they are but the Aramaic names of three weights, the Hebrew *māneh* or Latin *mina*, the *shekel*, and the *peras* or half-mina. The mysterious sentence would then read : "A mina, a mina, a shekel, and two half-minas," and is to be taken as a sort of cryptic proverb describing the heavy-weight Nebuchadnezzar, the light and worthless Belshazzar, and the kingdoms of the Medes and Persians that followed. But it may be that both interpretations have truth in them, and that the words were intended to bear a double significance.

In any case, where did they come from? Did our author invent them along with the rest of his tale? Were they an old proverb about the Babylonian empire which had been handed down to him, and which he makes dramatic use of? Were they, as some suggest, an inscription found upon the ruined palace walls in a later age, and thus giving a clue to the story of the miraculous hand? Or shall we even allow reality to the story in consideration of similar uncanny phenomena vouched for among scientists? Alfred Russell Wallace, for example, stoutly declares in his *Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* that the phenomenon of a hand, unattached to any human body, taking up a pen and writing with it, was seen by many persons in the occult séances conducted by Sir William Crookes. And in the same book he quotes William Howitt, the novelist, as affirming that he had both seen and touched such hands, and even received flowers from them! It would seem that there certainly do take place very many incomprehensible effects of psychic power, and the stories concerning them are not to be all hastily brushed aside as mere trickery or hallucination. It is, at least, just noteworthy that something has caused people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after Christ to declare that they have seen such things as, accord-

ing to this tale, were seen by people in old Babylon five centuries before Christ. And so it is possible that the story of the magic hand is not pure invention, but based upon some tradition of a ghostly apparition. But Belshazzar's feast was not a séance ; and the story of what took place at it, written nearly four hundred years later, is certainly not evidence worthy of laborious examination. So it is not worth while to worry much over the problem as to whether our author was inventing a splendid tall story out of his own head, or whether he was following some tradition of uncanny miracle when he told of the mystic hand writing on the wall. It is not the exact origin of the tale that matters, but its dramatic propriety in throwing a lurid flare upon the momentous historic event of the doom of Babylon. And it does this in a manner that touches sublimity —with such unforgettable force that the hand writing on the wall has become for all the world a proverb of impending judgment, a symbol of nemesis. It is assuredly a great artist who thus pictures to us at large the roistering banquet, and then, in contrast, the sudden, trembling horror of the tipsy crowd and the hurried summons of all the magicians and soothsayers, followed by the entry of Daniel and his defiantly stern eloquence against the prince ; and then finishes off his story with the single curt sentence : " In that night was Belshazzar, the king of the Chaldeans, slain." In such crushing, irreversible manner falls the doom of God. And the rest is silence.

According to Herodotus and Xenophon the Persians, by a daring and laborious strategem, had diverted the waters of the Euphrates into a canal to such a degree as to make it possible for their army to enter the city along the river bed. The enormous walls of Babylon were impregnable but the course of the great river through the city necessitated a huge gap in these walls, and here the Persians detected their opportunity. By their great engineering effort the river bed was made passable, and while the foolish Chaldeans

feasted the Persian army poured into the streets undeterred.

And then was fulfilled Jeremiah's pungent prophecy of doom upon that tyrant city : " O thou that dwellest upon many waters, abundant in treasures, thine end is come, and the measure of thy covetousness. Behold, I am against thee, O destroying mountain, saith the Lord, which destroyest all the earth ; and I will stretch out my hand upon thee, and the land shall tremble and sorrow : for every purpose of the Lord shall be performed against Babylon, to make the land of Babylon a desolation without an inhabitant. The mighty men of Babylon have forborn to fight, they have remained in their holds : their might hath failed ; they became as women. One post shall run to meet another, and one messenger to meet another, to show the King of Babylon that his city is taken at one end, and that the passages are stopped. And I will make drunk her princes, and her wise men, and her captains, and her rulers, and her mighty men : and they shall sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake, saith the King, whose name is the Lord of Hosts. And Babylon shall become heaps, a dwelling-place for dragons, an astonishment, and an hissing."

At perhaps an earlier date, a prophecy, included in the Book of Isaiah, had pictured the ox-wagons groaning under the weight of the great Babylonian idols as these were carried away by the victors : " Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth ; the carriages are heavy laden with idols ; they are a burden to the weary beasts." But this particular prophecy does not seem to have been fulfilled. According to Cyrus's own account, preserved on ancient inscribed cylinders, he maintained an attitude of respect to the local temples ; and the temple of Bel was still standing in the time of Alexander. And this would seem quite in accord with Cyrus's generous and politic disposition.

But the humiliation of the city was complete. The " Virgin-Daughter of the Chaldeans," as the Second Isaiah

says, "could no more be called tender and delicate ; no more be called The Lady of Kingdoms." She became a slave, crouching in menial labour at the grindstone ; widowed and childless at one stroke. For she had trusted in her wickedness, and said : "None seeth me." She had sat in her pride, saying, "I shall be a lady for ever ; I am, and there is none else beside me." But her astrologers and her star-gazers and her prognosticators were all in vain : "none shall save thee." And none did.

It seems doubtful whether the fortifications of Babylon were dismantled ; and the city continued to flourish for a couple of centuries after this, although the prestige and terror of its name had gone for ever, and it never recovered its former splendour. It was at a much later period that it finally decayed and became a ruin, "a home for jackals," with the marshes spreading around it as "pools for bitterns." Then, indeed, the terrible prediction of the Isaianic prophecy was literally fulfilled : "Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited ; neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there ; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But the wild beasts of the desert shall lie there ; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures ; and ostriches shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there ; and wolves shall cry in their castles, and jackals in their pleasant palaces."

Such was the ultimate doom of this gigantic city which was the terror of the ancient world. Old Testament prophecy is full of the echoes of its resounding fall. And still in the New Testament that ancient startled cry, at once of doom and of hope, "Babylon is fallen !" is raised afresh as a threat against the Neros and Domitians of Rome, and as a promise of relief to the persecuted Christians. For the fall of Babylon reverberated down the centuries as a thundering judgment of God ; as the chief overwhelming

example of the irresistible ascendancy of the God of justice and freedom.

In our modern world the fall of the Bastille marks an epoch, and fixes itself in the mind as a signal emblem of the ultimate impotence of mere arrogant might against democratic right. But the fall of Babylon marked a greater epoch, and may be taken as the symbol of the beginning of the whole modern movement of the world. For though the Persian empire may have been but little better than its predecessors, the age of its advent marks, too, the beginning of the great age of Greece ; and under Cyrus that contact of Europe with Asia began which transfigured the life of the ancient centres of civilization ; while the liberality and humanity of Cyrus himself set up, however feebly, a new standard of imperial government. The empires of Egypt, Assyria and Chaldea belong to a world quite remote from us. In the empire of Persia we see the first glimmering dawn of the world we know.

And if we believe that the progress of mankind is no haphazard thing, but reveals a controlling Providence, we shall delight in the dramatic truth of this old tale which records how the finger of God spelt out the doom of Babylon. History is the best of moral preceptors, and we see the *menē*, *tekēl*, *upharsin* written again and again upon the palace walls of its Belshazzars. They may seem to flourish like the green bay tree, but the law of the universe is against them : they cannot survive. Wrong has no impunity in this world ; its judgment is indelibly written, whether in the life of the individual or of the nation. As Huxley declared in his fine incisive way : " The absolute justice of the system of things is as clear to me as any scientific fact. The gravitation of sin to sorrow is as certain as that of the earth to the sun, and more so—for experimental proof of the fact is within reach of us all—nay, is before us all in our own lives, if we had but the eyes to see it." We may, if we will, plunge recklessly into our orgies of

self-indulgence and brutal inconsiderateness, but the walls of the universe hem us in, and sooner or later the superhuman fingers are to be seen writing upon them the tale of our destruction. We are, indeed, free to defy the Universal Will toward righteousness, but only at the price of unescapable penalty. "A man passes," says Emerson, "for what he is worth. What he is engraves itself on his face, on his form, on his fortunes, in letters of light. Concealment avails him nothing; boasting nothing. There is confession in the glances of our eyes; in our smiles, in salutations, and the grasp of hands. His sin bedaubs him, mars all his good impression. His vice glasses his eye, cuts lines of mean expression in his cheeks, pinches the nose, sets the mark of the beast on the back of the head, and writes O fool! fool! on the forehead of a king."

The Christian religion has often been accused by its critics of pretending to find a way round this inevitable nemesis which overtakes the sinful life, by its doctrine of forgiveness. But that is not true. Our Gospel, indeed, proclaims that there is opportunity of recovery and renewal for the most erring and pernicious heart of man; and it firmly asserts that, when a man throws over his evil ways, at the same time he sets going forces which may counteract and overcome the forces of penalty which have settled upon him. But penalty is never eliminated by any conjuring; it abides as long as there is cause for it to abide. The Gospel declares that there is a remedy for sin; it does not declare that there is immunity for sinners. The universe is utterly just. All our moral appeal to each other must surely rest on that adamant basis. What a man sows he shall reap—whether of sin or of repentance. We cannot dodge the Almighty. God's edicts are evident; His dooms are sure; His laws no man can annul. "Be sure your sins will find you out" is written broadcast over human history. And equally broadcast is written that other word: "If a man turn from his wickedness and doeth that which is

right, he shall save his soul alive." For the God who judges us is the God who is bent on saving us. He is a God who has become Man, and knows our human temptations and difficulties. It is the God who is Christ who judges the quick and the dead. Who else could fairly judge us? Whom else dare we choose to judge us? And we believe it is His judgment which we see going forward in all individual careers, and in all the rise and fall of nations. And His dooms, terrible as they are, are not the savage executions of a tyrant, but the firm disciplines of a father.

Belshazzar's grave is made,
His kingdom passed away,
He, in the balance weighed,
Is light and worthless clay;
The shroud, his robe of state,
His canopy the stone;
The Mede is at his gate!
The Persian on his throne!

There Byron leaves him—a bad man overtaken by nemesis. But in God's wide universe even our misguided, ill-bred Belshazzars may find somewhere a place for repentance. And all the hard, cruel life of those ancient empires that now lie in the dust, superseded by kindlier eras, may yet be blossoming elsewhere in some gentler fashion. Life is a solidarity. Through doom and atonement the whole race moves to its goal. And we without them shall not be made perfect.

But sin can never escape the hand writing on the wall; and our God, the Eternal Love, is a consuming fire.

THE SIGN OF THE
PROPHET JONAH

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it. . . . And the people of Nineveh believed God, and put on sackcloth. . . . And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way ; and God repented of the evil, which he said he would do unto them ; and he did it not.

BOOK OF JONAH.

An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign ; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it : because they repented at the preaching of Jonah ; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.

ST. MATTHEW xii. 39, 41.

THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAH

A FEW miles away from Nazareth lies a village which in ancient times was called Gath-hepher. It was the birthplace of the prophet Jonah, the son of Amittai, who, as we are told in II. Kings xiv. 25, flourished in the reign of Jeroboam II. in the first half of the eighth century B.C. On a hill beside the village there is still pointed out the traditional site of the prophet's tomb. Jesus Christ must have seen this place many a time in his boyhood, and dreamt of the famous old preacher who had trodden this ground so many centuries earlier. No other of the Old Testament prophets had come from our Lord's own immediate neighbourhood, and he must have felt, in consequence, a special interest in Jonah—an interest greatly deepened later on when his awakening mind came to realize that the Book of Jonah reached the loftiest height of Old Testament evangelism, and gave the most noble precedent to his own universal Gospel. Of the message and deeds of the historic Jonah, however, we really know nothing beyond the bare fact that he preached in the prosperous days of Jeroboam II., and apparently supported and justified that doughty king in his great imperial designs. For this Jeroboam took advantage of the temporary weakness of Syria, and extended his kingdom almost to the same area as that of Solomon—from Hamath on the Orontes in the far north to the Dead Sea in the south—and for forty years gave Israel an unwonted enjoyment of power, splendour and wealth. And all this great enterprise was

carried through, says the historian, "according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gath-hepher."

Jonah seems to have been, then, a patriotic prophet who believed in extending Israel's temporal power, and eagerly backed up his sovereign's ambitious exploits. These were possible, however, only because the Assyrians had crippled the power of Damascus ; in other words, Israel was indirectly indebted to Nineveh for its newly recovered prosperity. And hence it is argued that the prophet Jonah may have had grounds for intercourse with Nineveh, and may have visited that city. If so, there would be a foundation of fact on which to build up the tale told in the Book of Jonah. This is, of course, mere guess-work. For the book called after Jonah is not a history, and need not depend on any faint historical foundation at all. It is a piece of improving fiction, a novelette with a purpose, dating from about five hundred years after the lifetime of its hero ; and almost the latest, as it is perhaps the most nearly Christian, book in the Old Testament canon. It speaks of Nineveh, which was destroyed in 606 B.C.—a century and a half after Jonah—in the past tense as a place that had once been flourishing but had already ceased to exist. It quotes from the Book of Joel, a fourth-century writing. Its style and language belong to the later Hebrew period. And on these grounds, among others, the scholars date it roughly at about 300 or 250 B.C.

This delightful little book has had a most unfortunate career. The inventive ability of its author has concocted so startling an incident that popular attention has been diverted from the ethical message of the book to think only of Jonah's uncomfortable lodging in the belly of the whale. And nonsensical notions of the inspiration of Scripture have led folk to swallow the whole tale as pure matter of fact—an exploit in voracity that beats the whale

itself. But the author had no intention of stretching our mental gullets to this extent. It is pleasant to think of his amusement as he watched, from his vantage-ground in the beyond, the pious Dr. Pusey fumbling about to find stories of men who had been swallowed entire by whales or sharks in order to prove the historicity of Jonah's experience ; and denouncing all who do not believe in it as infidels. What a charming opportunity for some future Landor to pen an imaginary conversation in the next world between Pusey and the author of *Jonah* ! Indeed, when one thinks of it, there are quite a number of such interviews that beckon one enticingly : a revealing little chat between St. Paul and Calvin, for example ; or a few words from the author of the *Apocalypse* to the Second Adventists ; or a discussion on the Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture between Moses and Mr. Gladstone.

However, the purpose and character of the *Book of Jonah* are becoming clear to us again nowadays, as no doubt they were to its original readers, who enjoyed the story of the whale just as we enjoy the story of *Cinderella's* fairy coach. And because we can take it at its proper value, our minds are disengaged to dwell upon the moral message of the allegory ; and its incomparable generosity and tenderness captivate our hearts, and make us want to bind this quaint, glorious little book in vellum and gold.

Its author had the heart of a Christian missionary. He saw God yearning over the souls of men—not Israelites only, but all men, even the enemies of Israel. Had not the great *Isaiah* spoken of Egypt and Assyria and Israel all in one breath as children of God ? “ In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land : whom the Lord of Hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.” Had not *Amos* seen the hand of God guiding the Philistines and the Syrians even as He guided Israel ? “ Are ye not as

the children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel ? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt ? *and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir ?*” Here were old-time rebukes to the exclusive pride of Israel. But our author works upon these ancient precedents with a more tender evangelical desire and a more earnest ardour. He wants to teach Israel its missionary duty to the foreigner, even to those hated Assyrian foreigners who had been Israel’s cruellest scourge. And so he sets out to tell them a tale, a piece of pure fiction, which would carry home its moral to their hearts. And he takes for the hero of it the old prophet Jonah.

Jonah, he says, was once on a time bidden by God to go and preach to Nineveh, that monstrous heathen city on the Tigris, that with its suburbs stretched three days’ journey from east to west. (He exaggerates. Herodotus says more reasonably that it was one day’s journey, or about twenty miles across ; and this would include, presumably, much open ground between the village suburbs.) But Jonah was so agitated at the idea of having to preach to these heathen Ninevites that he rushed to the sea-coast, boarded a ship, and made off for the extreme other end of the world at Tarshish in Spain. But it is no good for a man to try to run away from God. “ If I dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me.” The Lord sent a terrible storm to overtake the ship, and the sailors got into a panic. When they had vainly tried every way of saving the ship, they felt that there must be a curse upon it, and decided to draw lots to see who the culprit was that was thus being pursued by God’s vengeance. Of course the lot fell on Jonah, who thereupon made confession, and self-sacrificingly bade them throw him into the sea. Well ! they were good fellows, and loath to take such a step ; so they still toiled to keep the ship afloat. But it was no good. The tempest beat them to a standstill. So at last in desperation, they took

up Jonah and heaved him overboard ; and at once the storm ceased and the sea was still. But God had a big fish waiting in the sea, which swallowed Jonah, carried him back to the coast of Palestine, and vomited him up on the shore all safe and sound.

Then God's word came to him a second time, and he dare not again disobey. So he trudged off across the hills and the desert to Nineveh, and stood there in the market-place threatening the city with God's judgment upon its sins—one man among a million who alone knew the true God ; like the figure described by a modern poet :

He came to the desert of London town
Mirk miles broad ;
He wandered up and he wandered down,
Ever alone with God.

But this great hulking city of heathens began to repent. By the king's command everybody put on sackcloth and began to fast. Even the horses and cows were dressed in sackcloth. No city could be more earnestly penitent. And then, as Jonah had all along expected, God forgave Nineveh. It was too bad ! Jonah felt mightily aggrieved. He had wanted to see Nineveh burnt up with brimstone like Sodom : such an issue might have repaid him for his trouble in travelling all this long journey to denounce the wretched city. But now he felt tricked. What right had God to treat these scandalous heathen with as much mercy as He showed to His own chosen people ? So Jonah went and sulked in a corner, like the Prodigal Son's elder brother. It was scorching hot as he sat there outside the city walls. But God made a big gourd grow up like magic, and the shade of it was very pleasant to Jonah. However, he still sulked. And next morning God sent a worm which ate at the roots of the gourd, and it withered. Then a fierce sirocco wind came up out of the east, and poor Jonah grew faint with the heat and discomfort. Then God whispered him in the ear : " Doest thou well to be angry ? "

But Jonah was not going to be laughed out of his ill-humour. "Yes," he said, "I have very good reason to be bitterly angry." And the Lord said: "Thou hast pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured; and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand helpless babes, and also much cattle?"

With that noble rhetorical question the tale ends. There is no need of any further word. The tender pity of God is unanswerable. And His question is left as an abiding challenge for Israel through all its future days. The Chosen People had to learn that the love of God is broader than the limits of man's mind; that even the fierce and cruel Assyrians were also God's children, capable of repentance and destined for salvation; and Israel's task was not merely to save its own soul, but to evangelize the world.

That is the most generous note ever struck in the Old Testament. The Assyrians were the terror and curse of the ancient east. For centuries Israel had cowered before them. It was they who had ravaged and enslaved northern Israel. And yet these people are singled out as objects of Israel's evangelism and God's mercy. Every thought of revenge is to be laid aside; all the piled-up wrong of ages to be forgotten and forgiven; and Nineveh, even Nineveh, is to be welcomed into its share of the divine pity. The little book which utters this gospel is the very crown of Hebrew literature. Any Christian literature might be proud of it.

And its allegory is not so whimsical as at first sight it might appear. The great fish that swallowed Jonah is a symbol in frequent use among the prophets. It is used by them as a type of the huge powers that swallowed up Israel in captivity. In Jeremiah's fifty-first chapter, for example, Israel is made to say: "Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, hath devoured me, he hath swallowed me up like a dragon, he hath cast me out"; while God

declares : “ I will punish Bel in Babylon, and I will bring forth out of his mouth that which he has swallowed up.” To the Semitic imagination the sea was full of fabulous monsters—dragons and leviathans. Even to-day the Syrian nations, like so many other rather primitive people, will, on the occasion of an eclipse, shout and beat drums frantically to frighten away the great dragon that is swallowing the sun. When Assyria or Babylon swallowed up Israel in captivity, what more natural symbol, then, than this of the great dragon ? And the opening chapters of Jonah probably intend by means of this symbol to describe how, before the Captivity, Israel had had a message to deliver to the nations, but had shirked giving it ; as a result dire calamities had come upon her, and she was gobbled up into the rapacious maw of the Mesopotamian tyrant. But not for final destruction. It was all part of the divine working. And at length God caused the tyrant beast to cast forth his prey. Then again the call comes to Jonah, i.e. Israel, to preach God’s truth even to its enemies. And the call is obeyed now, but in a bitter spirit of vengeance rather than of mercy. Israel is very ready to preach destruction upon the foreigners for their sins. There was never in Israel so intense a feeling of separateness and spiritual pride as in the days of its re-constitution after the Captivity. The Jew would gladly proclaim God’s doom upon these “ lesser breeds without the Law ” who had had the effrontery to chastise and enslave the Chosen Race. By all means let the Lord’s judgment smite them ! The Jonah who goes to Nineveh hoping to see God punish that detested people is doubtless our author’s portrayal of the average Israelite of the Persian and Greek period. And it is against this temper of exclusiveness, and this spirit of revenge masquerading as righteous indignation, that his noble little tract is written. He wants to convert Israel to magnanimity and evangelistic love.

Probably the allegory might be traced further ; and if

we knew more surely the writer's time and circumstance, we might see in the gourd, so quickly growing and so quickly vanishing, some power or institution which for awhile had given comfort to post-exilic Israel, and whose disappearance had provoked tender regret. And just because Israel can thus show tenderness in regard to something which nearly concerns itself, the writer is the more intent to show up the contrast of God's wider and disinterested pity. It is so easy to love those who are a benefit to us. Do not even the publicans the same? But a higher ethic bids us love our enemies, do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that have persecuted us. That is the ultimate ethic ; and the story of Jonah was written to enforce it. No wonder the little book was dear to the heart of Christ.

If we imagine an Armenian writing a cunning little parable to teach his countrymen to have pity on Constantinople, we shall understand the courage of this book, and the deft art with which it allays the instinctive hatred and terror of the great tyrant city by bringing before its readers' imagination the tens of thousands of helpless, innocent children and the poor dumb beasts within it. There had been a day when not even that plea would have succeeded ; when Israel, made frantic by torture, had the terrible cry wrung out of it : " Blessed be he that taketh thy little ones and dasheth them against the stones." But the agony had passed away now, and our author felt that he could safely appeal to the humanity of his readers, if only he could light up that fierce old city for a moment as a place where little children played, and kindly family life went on, even as in Jerusalem. " Nineveh has done you bitter wrong," he would say, " but see these children trooping about the streets, and the good serviceable cattle bearing their burdens. Here is innocence enough. You would not war against children, nor teach vengeance to these babes, surely. Be magnanimous, at least for the children's sake." And one

can imagine how Israel's vision of Nineveh as a stronghold of haughty and cruel warriors faded, as this tale was told, like a dissolving view on the screen, and gave place to another vision of a human, even tender, Nineveh, where mothers crooned infants to sleep, and children watched for fathers coming home. And so the reader's heart was softened, and the way prepared for the entry of a new evangel of God's universal redemption.

But the Book of Jonah did not convert everybody to the gospel it proclaimed. In our Lord's day the very scribes and Pharisees who professed to be the special guardians and exponents of Scripture were often the men who, above all others, had failed to grasp its highest messages. That is why Jesus so often falls foul of them. And he enjoys the humour of rebuking them out of their own sacred books, which, with all their pedantic learning and punctiliousness they so ill understood.

Now, twice over in the Gospel of St. Matthew and once again in that of St. Luke, we read of Pharisees or other unspecified folk coming to Jesus and requesting him to give some miraculous sign of his authority. And Jesus answers that no sign shall be given to them save the sign of the prophet Jonah. A reply thus recorded three times by the evangelists certainly has a strong claim to authenticity. Doubtless Jesus did make such a reply. What did he mean by it? What was the sign of Jonah?

Nobody would be likely to miss the true meaning of his words if it were not for the unhappy insertion of the fortieth verse in Matthew's twelfth chapter, which compares Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the whale to the Son of Man's burial for "three days and nights in the heart of the earth."

This rather fatuous analogy breaks into the line of thought most disconcertingly. The verse is in all probability an annotation by some commentator who was a good bit of a fool, and it has by inadvertence got written

into the text from the margin where it was first jotted down in some old manuscript. It is not likely to be part of what Matthew originally wrote ; and it is best to put one's pen through it, and forget it. Then we see that Matthew's passage corresponds thoroughly with Luke's, and its meaning lies on the surface. Jesus was not drawing fantastic analogies between his burial and Jonah's "three days" in the whale. He was at once far too witty and far too earnest to indulge in any such vapid grotesquery. His answer is full of appositeness, dignity and vigour. "You want some thaumaturgic sign, do you, as a proof of the truth I utter ? I tell you there shall be no such sign. What could it add to or detract from the truth of what I preach ? Go back to your own Scriptures ; study the Book of Jonah, and you will see that my doctrine is all there in germ : the doctrine of universal redemption and world-wide brotherhood. The grace of God to the Gentiles is the theme of the Book of Jonah, and it is my theme also ; and that is why you hate to hear me. But just as Jonah's preaching of judgment upon sin was its own sufficient evidence to the Ninevites ; or just as Solomon's wisdom was its own witness to the Queen of Sheba, so must my message bear its own authoritative stamp ; and it will do so to all simple and earnest souls—to you yourselves if you did not deliberately blind your minds with prejudice and malice. Let the Ninevites—let any simple, truthful people, heathen though they be—be your judges. You will stand condemned before them. For they repented at the preaching of Jonah ; and there is a greater than Jonah among you now."

The sign of the prophet Jonah is the self-witnessing authority of evangelic truth in the converted lives which follow its utterance. It is not an extraneous sign. On the contrary, it denies the possibility of such signs. It bids us look for the divine authority of a message not in any accompanying magic, but in the quality of the message itself and the moral effects of it. In this answer Jesus,

as usual, pierces through all the trickery and humbug and muddle-headedness of his opponents, and lays bare the root principles that concern the point at issue. The Pharisees were demanding an authority for truth outside the truth itself. There is no such authority. The truth is its own authority. You cannot bolster up spiritual truth on a padding of miracle; neither can you disprove spiritual truth because its preacher shows no thaumaturgic wonders. But the mind of man is for ever committing intellectual adultery by confusing the authority of truth and right with external "signs." It is continually led away by its admiration for any sort of showy cunning or meretricious talent or occult wizardry, and so failing in loyalty to the spirit of truth to which it ought to keep wedded. And it is against that fatally immoral tendency that Jesus Christ lays down his ringing axiom: there shall no sign be given but the sign of Jonah.

Personalities of great spiritual power and insight have often worked wonders on the earth and made the populace gape with astonishment. The stories of miracle which gather about famous names will seldom be without foundation. We are only yet on the threshold of understanding the sovereignty of mind over matter. The development of legend out of simple occurrences which for some reason or other strongly seized men's imaginations is easily traceable again and again, as these studies of Old Testament stories show. But that does not explain away very many abnormal revelations of power that often accompany a strong life of faith. But it is not such happenings in themselves which authenticate a man's message to the world as a message from God, but rather the temper that controls them and the use to which they are put. Jesus undoubtedly possessed and used abnormal powers of healing; but he flatly refuses to rest his claim of divine mission upon any exhibition of unserviceable "wonders." The only authentic sign-manual of God is the sign of Jonah and of every other genuine

prophet—the converting and saving power of the truth spoken, its efficacy in the enhancement of life. Three hundred years had passed away since that noble little missionary parable was written, and yet here were the official representatives of Judaism living in blind spiritual pride, nursing scorn and hatred of the Samaritan and the Gentile, and eager to entrap and suppress the Son of Man who came preaching a gospel of universal salvation, and exhibiting a love that recognized no boundaries. All the slow development of truth throughout the Old Testament had led up to this finally adequate gospel. An intelligent grasp of earlier Scripture would have made men leap at the words of Jesus as the obvious fulfilment of all that the prophets had reached out towards. Yet these pitiful pedants, jealous of their official authority, do their best to discredit Christ's lovable and conquering truths. But we can do nothing against the truth. The scribes may read their Old Testament in vain, but its evangel, taken up and reinforced by Jesus Christ and His Church, will win the world in spite of them.

Far away back in the dawn of history Abraham had been led into covenant with a God righteous and merciful. And his children's children had for ages stood out as a chosen race holding up the light of that truth to the nations. Moses and Samuel, Elijah and Isaiah, and all the goodly fellowship of the prophets had carried on and replenished that torch of truth. Smoky and fading at times through the long night of Israel's troubled history, yet it was never quenched, but burnt clearer and brighter as time wore on. And at length the day dawned and the Sun of Righteousness arose with healing in his wings. "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His Person, whom He hath appointed heir of all things." It was the Old Testament that fed the heart and mind

of Christ, and He is its only adequate interpreter. In Him the Chosen People becomes the sacrificial servant of mankind ; in Him, as the author of the Book of Jonah yearned to see, the very Ninevites of earth are brought into the kindly fellowship of redemption ; all people become chosen people ; there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is above all, and in all, and through all. Henceforward there is neither Greek nor Jew, bond nor free.

We may still study the Jewish Old Testament with vast profit, but only as the foundation of that New Testament which is the spiritual Magna Charta of the whole human race. And the New Testament stands or falls for ever by one only sign of divine authority—the sign of the prophet Jonah, in whose story the ultimate evangel of love was first uttered, and whose preaching was authenticated by the repentance of Israel's arch-enemy, the dreaded city of Nineveh.

In this way is the little Book of Jonah immortalized by Jesus Christ, and linked up with his new world-wide covenant. It was meet that it should be so. For Old Testament prophecy culminates in this book ; and we take leave of the Old Testament on an exalted plane from which it is but a brief and easy step into the New ; where all that Israel's poets most divinely sang, all that her prophets most bravely hoped, at last found an utterance and an embodiment supreme, faultless, and final. And the Word, so long struggling to find expression through man, became flesh, and once for all wrought out with human hands the creed of creeds wherein lies salvation for all men for ever.

Laus Deo, qui est per omnia sæcula benedictus.

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